

Rivers and Society

Landscapes, Governance
and Livelihoods

Edited by Malcolm Cooper, Abhik
Chakraborty and Shamik Chakraborty

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The Rhine-Meuse delta
(re)imagined

Eveline R. de Smalen

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Introduction

Maarten 't Hart's 1986 novel *De Jacobs ladder* (*Jacob's Ladder*) opens with the word "Weertij" (11; the translations are my own), an archaic Dutch word for ebb, and continues: "the ferryboat lay moored at the lowest landing stage" (Hart 1986, 11).¹ Its narrator, Adriaan Vroklage, is about to cross the *Nieuwe Waterweg* (New Waterway), the artificial mouth of the river Rhine in the Netherlands, on that very ferryboat, but is delaying his boarding, enjoying the sights, sounds and smells produced by the river and the activity taking place. Standing near the rear of a frigate that lies moored in the harbour, he muses "It smelled so wonderful there, it was a smell like no other, a smell of decay and lubricating oil and ropes and, strangely enough, also of manure" (Hart 1986, 11). When he boards the ferry, he narrates: "On that broad gangway I ascended to heaven" (Hart 1986, 12). As much as he is intrigued by the frigate, the moment his ferry leaves for Rozenburg, at this point in time still an island in the *Waterweg*, he walks to the front of the ship to observe the river, already anticipating fresh joys:

It was always so lovely to look at approaching Rozenburg, to smell the briny water, and to feel the sea wind. Moreover, the ferry almost invariably had to give way to some coaster or tanker, so that you could see these ships from very close up as well. Common sandpipers or black terns or oystercatchers flew over the water in closed ranks.

(Hart 1986, 12)

This first scene and its evocative rendering of the many details that Adriaan registers are indicative for the rest of the story, in which the river plays a central role. The story mostly takes place near the mouth of the Rhine-Meuse delta, in the strictly Calvinist town of Maassluis, where since its founding, the river has dictated life, as it does for Adriaan. In this chapter, I will first discuss the role of the river and its surrounding ecology in *De Jacobs ladder*, paying particular attention to the ways religion and materiality play into this. I will then move on to a discussion of non-literary texts that describe the development of Rozenburg, comparing the language of the novel to the language used by different parties

involved in the development of the Rotterdam harbour, such as government officials and conservationists. I will finally show how shared themes of embraces, power and love work through all texts, moving towards the development of the river as a more artificial, but still ecologically significant area, and a green harbour that can, despite the destruction that lies at its base, become a place of new hope and beauty.

Rivers have always had great imaginary power in western culture. Simon Schama (1995) writes about the intimate connection between rivers and human life and imagination:

Were [rivers] not figured as *bodies* of water because, since antiquity, their flow was likened to the blood circulating through the body? . . . to see a river was to be swept up in a great current of myths and memories that was strong enough to carry us back to the first watery element of our existence in the womb. And along that stream were borne some of the most intense of our social and animal passions: the mysterious transmutations of blood and water; the vitality and mortality of heroes, empires, nations, and gods.

(Schama 1995, 247)

T.S. McMillin (2011) also notes the abundance of imaginative writing on rivers and argues that rivers are intrinsically linked to our process of meaning making because they share a similar system. He writes: “Literature presents a special set of conditions in which we can study meaning, and literature involving rivers offers a rich resource for understanding meaning’s fluidity” (xiv). There is thus no doubt that rivers have a great bearing on our imagination, and Chad Wriglesworth (2012, 98) argues that the converse may also be true. He writes: “literary criticism can excavate ‘the swirl of forces’ that transformed specific watersheds; but more importantly, the arts can undermine and contest environmental injustices in ways that call for the reconstruction of human relationships with place.” While I will not go so far as to say that *De Jacobs ladder* has shaped the physical appearance of the *Waterweg*, I will show that ideas explored in the novel eventually also emerge in ecological development policy, indicating that the relation between literature and the material world is a reciprocal one.

When Adriaan arrives on the opposite side of the river, he says: “Rozenburg. The tide had turned” (13), which is true in more ways than he can yet fathom. When he looks back at the Maassluis bank, he sees the confusion surrounding an event that will mark the rest of his childhood and adolescence, although he does not realise this yet. He is slightly upset that he misses the spectacle, but as soon as the scene vanishes from view, his mind wanders again. Below the dyke:

I suddenly smelled the imperious, peaceful, deep smell of rapeseed, of a whole field full of rapeseed. I almost forgot what lay behind me. Also, poppies and snapdragons grew on the sloping dyke. In between them, rare blues and coppers and yellow small whites. They chased each other, crossed the road, disappeared in the rapeseed, reappeared in larger numbers. Yet it was more quiet

than in an empty church. And it was warm, very warm. It was as if the silence and the warmth intensified each other. “It is warm-silent,” I whispered, “it is silent-warm.”

(Hart 1986, 13)

Adriaan is very perceptive to the life that grows, flutters and blossoms all around him. To him, the whole world is active and alive: “It was as if that whole field was in conversation, with the wind and the sky and the dunnocks sauntering about and sometimes flying over it” (Hart 1986, 15); he shows an acute awareness that “the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives, stories” (Iovino and Opperman 2014, 1).

The landscape becomes increasingly dreamlike and surreal: as Adriaan walks on:

It seemed as if the path went down and as if that buzzing, loud hawthorn hedge protected all that lay behind. It was as if it was on fire. . . . I came to a gravel path that circled around a lawn. Two gigantic plane trees rose in the middle of the circle. A clothesline, on which sheets hung to dry, stretched between these two trees. The lawn was blue from bird’s eye.

(Hart 1986, 16)

Then, from this mysterious place, shielded from the busy world he knows by bushes, dykes and the *Waterweg*, a girl appears:

Motionless I stood watching the blue lawn. It seemed even warmer there than elsewhere. It was incredibly summery, incredibly peaceful. Then, from the house beyond, a dark girl my age emerged. She was not startled when she saw me. She walked over the blue field. It seemed a coincidence that, as she did so, she came my way.

(Hart 1986, 16)

Adriaan’s narration in all its celebratory dreaminess can be read as sensuous poesis, which Scott Knickerbocker (2012) describes as “[performing] the complexity, mystery, and beauty of nature rather than merely represent[ing] it” (Hart 1986, 159). In showing how alive the world around him is, how everything buzzes and flutters and grows, his perception also displays a “sense of strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side” that Jane Bennett (2010, 17–18) advocates “to treat nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities – more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.” This sentiment shines through clearly in Adriaan’s narrative as he pays particular attention to all the different creatures, their behaviours and surroundings and all their wondrous particulars. Every detail of the material world merits specific attention, whereby Adriaan shows how important it is. In Adriaan’s view, the world around him is a promise of a more interconnected, caring future for the relation between humans and non-humans.

Adriaan spends the rest of the afternoon on Rozenburg with the girl Klaske, whom he decides to get married to when they both grow up, although Adriaan expressly states the precondition that he will only marry her if her house will still be there by that time, and will not have been swallowed by the Rotterdam harbour, the expansion of which threatens the island. He is very much impressed by the house and its surroundings. Again, in his description, the impressions of the senses are made incredibly vivid, so much as to be personified:

it was just as if there, yes, it sounds so silly, but still it was true, it was just as if summer lives there. I mean: somewhere else it is also summer, but he lives with you, there is his house and his garden, you understand, yes, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else more than there.

(Hart 1986, 23)

In ecocriticism, anthropomorphism is a much-contested literary device, as some believe it shows a harmful anthropocentrism (Knickerbocker 2012, 5), but Adriaan uses it to represent summer as a co-inhabitant, and to show how he and his surroundings exist entirely on equal footing. This sentiment resonates with Adriaan's earlier descriptions of the river and the ecology of the opposite bank, in which his attention for the vibrancy of the material world indicates a great respect for local riverine ecology.

Summer is hardly an obvious object for anthropomorphism. It is a concept that shines through in various materialities – the plants that are approaching the peak of their abundance; the animals that show behaviour particular to the season – but it is not itself a tangible entity that agency can easily be ascribed to. Adriaan, however, sees a network of different material manifestations of the season that all connect and culminate in a symphony of summer. The fact that Adriaan ascribes agency to this assembly of ecological particulars, and brings them together in an extensive network of creatures shows how far his understanding of and respect for the natural world goes.

When Adriaan returns from his waking dream, he is confronted with the aftermath of the events he got a glimpse from after he got off the ferry earlier that day: a boy fell in the water, was caught by the frigate's propeller and died, his clothes torn and smeared with oil, his body maimed beyond recognition. Since people passing by saw Adriaan on the quay near the ship and the boy's knee showed a scar similar to one Adriaan has, he has been reported dead. When he returns home, he finds his parents grieving. This case of mistaken identity gravely impacts Adriaan. It results in a feeling of guilt that will haunt him for years and constitutes the main theme of the novel: he feels that the boy, Jan Ruygveen, died in his place and he himself should not be alive. No longer able to live a carefree life, he befriends Anton Ruygveen, Jan's younger brother, in an attempt to atone for what happened, but the rest of his childhood and adolescence will be marked by further tragedies, often but not always deaths, for which Adriaan feels a sense of responsibility even if he is not to blame.

Adriaan, then, loses his innocence in the river which, having taken Jan's life, has become the site of Adriaan's guilt and shame. The tide also turns for his dream-island Rozenburg, which is increasingly being transformed until it is completely swallowed up, sacrificed to the Rotterdam harbour. Although Adriaan never returns, distant echoes of the island's transformation can be heard throughout the novel, and he keeps revisiting the day he spent there in his mind.

As he listens to the destruction of the idyllic landscape of the rural island from the opposite bank, Adriaan mourns the loss of nature deeply. At the beginning of the novel, Adriaan was equally excited about the river's ecology and its industry and appreciated their working together, but the balance has now tipped. Industry has become too powerful and ecology in the human world is receding further and further. There is no longer an equal relation but rather an overpowering of one force by the other. The bangs and hisses of industrialisation indicate to him that something is irretrievably lost; not only the beauty of nature, but its surprises and excitement.

To Adriaan's grandfather, religion is intertwined with local ecology. When he and his grandson attend the Ruygveen patriarch's public announcement of the establishment of a new church, they connect his occasional Bible reading directly to the loss of nature, although Ruygveen clearly does not have ecology on his mind. Adriaan's grandfather describes Ruygveen as "a truly magnificent bloke . . . he is still one of those real old-fashioned followers of Ledeboer,² one who ferrets through the Bible to dig out the very blackest" (Hart 1986, 32).

Indeed, Ruygveen starts the meeting by proposing to read the complete, not particularly cheerful, Book of Zephaniah, in which the eponymous prophet speaks of the Last Judgement. Both Adriaan and his grandfather are most captivated by Zephaniah 2:14:

And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the bittern and the night owl shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; *their* voice shall sing in the windows; desolation *shall be* in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work.

(King James)³

Adriaan's grandfather comments: "How wonderful, this Book of Zephaniah. What language! I almost died when he read: 'Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea coast, I will even destroy thee, that there shall be no inhabitant.' As if he was reading about Rozenburg" (Hart 1986, 78, original omission in Bible quotation).

Adriaan's grandfather takes this comparison of the state of the land in Zephaniah and in his own region quite serious. Schama (1995) writes about the mythologising of rivers and the connections presumed to exist between Biblical and local rivers, creating a basis for a religious and cultural connectivity (Schama 1995, 266, 301). Barbara R. Rossing (2000, 205) also mentions the adaptability of river mythology in this respect. Schama (1987) argues that, to Calvinists in the seventeenth century, "The Bible became a source book of analogies for their own contemporary history, as well as an inspirational talisman on the field

of battle. Its swarming detail, moreover, allowed for a high degree of specificity to suit all sorts of contingency” (Schama 1995, 95). The Dutch, in particular, “regard[ed] themselves as ordained and blessed survivors of the deluge.” Even in the twentieth-century society that *De Jacobs ladder* portrays, this way of reading the Bible is still in practice. By relating Biblical narratives to everyday situations, the characters show how acutely relevant the Bible is to them, and how important it is to their conception of the world they inhabit.

The initial point of connection that Adrian’s grandfather identifies is the coast, but his focus soon shifts back inland to his native riverscape as he muses on the presence – or rather absence – of bitterns there: “If now you know there to be one somewhere, you’d lie in the reed bed in a rowing boat for three weeks just to see it, if you had to, and if you see it, you won’t forget it as long as you live. . . . Could it be true? Could the bittern and the night owl live on Rozenburg?” (Hart 1986, 78). Although the landscapes Zephaniah and Adriaan’s grandfather are confronted with are both infected by human degradation, they are also opposites. Zephaniah predicts a civilisation destroyed, its inhabitants exterminated and its ruins taken back by nature. The resulting image is exactly that which Adriaan’s grandfather sees when he looks admiringly at the Rozenburg of old. In his view, this landscape is Edenic and civilisation, with its concrete and asphalt, is its ruin.

Elizabeth A. Johnson suggests that both the Old and New Testament “teach that the creating and redeeming God loves and takes delight in the natural world, which correspondingly enjoys an integrity that is not dependent on human decision” (2000, 6). Johnson suggests that in the scriptures of the Jewish tradition, from which Christianity took its early orientation, the natural world is pervasively and comfortably present. Not only is it depicted as God’s good creation and covenant partner, but it shares in the blessings of the human covenant as well as in judgment when that covenant is broken (Johnson, 2000, 5)

This idea is very much related to Adriaan’s grandfather’s vision of Rozenburg. He sees the construction of the harbour as moral as well as ecological degradation, and finds the idea of God’s punishment in the form of the destruction of civilisation unabashedly appealing. He would very much like the earth to share in God’s judgement as it did in the Old Testament days. This ecological reading of Zephaniah is one that does not interest Ruygveen. The citizens of Maassluis are mostly concerned with spiritual matters, occupying themselves with a dematerialised Calvinist faith. Few people seem to concern themselves very much with matters of the material world. Johnson (2000) argues that the Reformation to a great extent meant a turn towards anthropocentrism in religion, which resulted in the non-human world being left behind in appreciation. Similarly, Manuel A. Vásquez (2011) argues that the move away from the Catholic Church meant a revolt against its appreciation of material wealth, and by extension materiality in general.

Adriaan and his grandfather form an antithesis to this tradition. When they talk about religion, they are very much preoccupied with its alignment with the material world. Like the presence of industry and ecology, the spiritual and material world must exist together. It is of great concern to him that when Biblical

motives are applied to the real world, they do not conflict. Although he is deeply sceptical of religious institutions, he finds that religion must be treated with utmost attention and respect, and attentiveness to the material world is an integral part of that.

The earth and its ecology, to him, are the main source of meaningful comfort. When Adriaan expresses his concern regarding the future as they are fishing, a fish falls off his grandfather's hook, and he comments:

Look . . . that's what I mean, you're always being tricked, but it doesn't matter, because now it's summer and the sun is shining, and if you smell very carefully you can feel the autumn coming. Soon, the migratory birds will come over, and it will be winter and you will have the most beautiful sunsets of the year, and maybe you can go skating. And then spring will come again.
(Hart 1986, 108)

It is in this scene, perhaps, that his feelings for the landscape turn most directly and explicitly to ecological concern, as he mentions the impending destruction of nature reserve *De Beer*, the existence of which was threatened, and later indeed obliterated, by the development of the Rotterdam harbour.

Adriaan and his grandfather, then, do not at all share the classic Christian view that Crockett and Robbins (2012, 19) describe as "the religious denial or rejection of all things human, which is shown most clearly by the Christian despising of the world." They love the world and want to embrace it with both hands, as is shown in Adriaan's grandfather's love of women, and Adriaan's habit of embracing people to provide help and comfort. He is a strong person with the ability to use his muscular power not for dominance but for consolation.

In the hospital where Adriaan starts to work towards the end of the novel, he runs into Ruygveen again, and he provides Adriaan's deliverance from his perceived guilt. Ruygveen has lost all his children either to suicide, emigration, or marriage to a Catholic, or, as he puts it, a "whoremaster of Babylon" (Hart 1986, 200), and finally has also lost his sanity. During this meeting, Ruygveen mentions that Jan's death was not an accident, but a suicide. This insight changes the way Adriaan has made sense of his life, and the way he will be able to make sense of it in the future:

Yes, it did matter very much, it changed everything, I was not guilty in that case, or maybe I was, but there was no question about any mistake. This could not have happened to me just as well. I could have lived differently the last ten years, I could have been happy, I could have made other friends, could have put my arm around Klaske on the *Zegwaartse weg*.
(Hart 1986, 202)

It is Ruygveen, too, who encourages him to look towards the future and embrace it, as he, surprisingly for such a strict protestant, orders Adriaan to "Come on, put your arm around [Klaske]" (Hart 1986, 204). Ruygveen, in spite of his misery, also

looks towards the future, but his is a dematerialised one: the future that comes after life.

Adriaan's future, conversely, is one that will take place very much on the blooming earth. As his grandfather, years before, had asserted, spring has come again and, as in the beginning of the book, Adriaan again comments on the vegetation around him: "[Ruygveen] stood still on the gravel path. It was spring. Close to his feet, the yellow celandine blossomed" (Hart 1986, 206). What finally unites Ruygveen and Adriaan, as well as the material and spiritual worlds, is a verse from Isaiah that Ruygveen cites at the very end of the novel:

The sun came through again, shone on his face. And he said, with the same voice as which he had said "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD," that weak, yet far-reaching voice of the Fenacoliusplein: "He hath lovingly embraced my soul."⁴

(Hart 1986, 206)

The rhetoric of love, embraces and equal relations that is present in *De Jacobsladder* is also pertinent to the relation of nature and industry in the harbour. Throughout the novel, Adriaan and his grandfather expressed a need for a dialectic between opposing sides, giving a voice to both ecology and industrial development, the spiritual and the natural world. Rather than one side overpowering the other, they speak for an embrace. When the Rotterdam harbour saw its first major expansion after the Second World War, many people involved in its development used the rhetoric of power to discuss what they saw as good or bad developments, depending on what institution they represented. From the last decade of the twentieth century onwards, however, we can see that the language that is employed, even if it invokes power, does so to move towards a concept of nature that can embrace seeming opposites. Industry and ecology can come together in this narrative, as spirituality and materialism had done before for Adriaan and Ruygveen.

As the Rotterdam harbour expanded, those with an interest in nature could only watch as government planned to "tarnish" (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 1) or "sacrifice" (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 5) ever more parts of it. In 1959, the president and secretary of the *Contact-Commissie voor Natuur- en Landschapsbescherming* (Contact Commission for Nature- and Landscape Protection), M. Van der Goes van Naters and R. J. de Wit, petitioned against a new land use plan for the Den Briel Meuse, the branch of the Meuse flowing to the south of Rozenburg, which proposed far more extensive changes to the landscape than initially planned. They mentioned they were "deeply concerned about the consequences of the stormy development of the harbour and industrial area along the *Nieuwe Waterweg* for the preservation of natural areas located in this part of your province [of South Holland]," and that they "fiercely opposed" these plans (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 1). Subsequently they adopted a more resigned tone. They wrote that they

would support parts of the plan: “if the execution of an important part of the plan-Europoort has to be accepted as reality” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 4). Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit pointed out that they only agreed because they knew their concerns about the area would not be taken into consideration by those who had the final say in the area’s future. They saw this specific petition only as a way “to make the best of it” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 4, italics indicate original English).

Europoort is the part of the Rotterdam harbour that was built on Rozenburg and *De Beer*. *De Beer* was originally a dune landscape that owed much of its appearance in the 1950s to human activity, particularly to the construction of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* in 1872. This new canal separated *De Beer* from the main land that it was previously connected to, and instead connected it to Rozenburg. The location was now much more isolated, which facilitated the relatively undisturbed development of a rich ecology with a prosperous bird population (Buijsman, 2009). During the construction of the canal, nutrient-rich clay that was dug out of the *Nieuwe Waterweg* was dumped in parts of *De Beer*. This altered the course of the river, resulting in a decreasing flow rate and water level along the surface of *De Beer*, reducing the river’s erosion potential and increasing siltation. The Second World War saw major disturbance on *De Beer* due to the construction of the Atlantikwall, but soon after the end of the war, the local ecology recovered and flourished again, albeit in an altered state (Buijsman 2009). In their letter, Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit employ a language of violence and power when they write about the government’s plans for *De Beer*. They personify the area as Adriaan did earlier, but rather than showing nature as equal, their writing presents nature as a victim of human actions: “we see this alternative land use possibility as a gun to the heart of nature reserve *De Beer*” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 4–5). Similarly, the mayor and secretary of Heenvliet, a small town on the other side of the Den Briel Meuse, J. H. Vijgeboom and J. van Herpen (1959) described the revised plan in another petition as a “fatal intervention” (p. 1.5t 3) to the existence of the reserve. Henrik Stevens (1999), on the other hand, personifies the city of Rotterdam, by showing it as violent and dangerous monster: “the *De Beer* nature conservation area, would have to be cleared to satisfy Rotterdam’s hunger for land” (Stevens 1999, 88). The same literary device of personification, then, is employed in different ways and in different texts, fictional and non-fictional. It serves to present river and riverine ecology as entities that are emphatically alive and have agency and particular interests that have to be taken into account.

The newfound glory of *De Beer*, however, did not last long. That Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit are truly in despair over this came through very clearly in their letter, in which they wrote: “We ask with emphasis: does the industrial expansion have limits nowhere anymore?” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 1.5n 5). Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit already realised that the days of *De Beer* were most likely numbered in 1958. In a letter to H.J. Hofstra, Minister of Finance, they anticipated “that the object of trusteeship of the actual nature reserve *De Beer*, because of the execution of the Rotterdam Europoort

plans, will be diminished in the near future, and in a farther future possibly will be lost completely” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1958, 2).

Indeed, the *Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst in Zuid-Holland* (Provincial Urban Development Service in South Holland) had expressed little concern for the protection of native species in their 1950 *Rapport over de toekomstige landschappelijke ontwikkeling van de oeverlanden langs de Brielsche Maas* (Report on the Future Landscape Development of the Banklands along the Den Briel Meuse) (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950). The report showed no awareness that the river is a living entity that needs to be taken care of. Nature was rather seen as a canvas to be painted on at humankind’s leisure. The *Rapport* is mostly concerned with industrial and recreational developments, and with related infrastructure. As far as nature is concerned, the *stedenbouwkundige dienst* considered the harbour plans as an opportunity to improve its aesthetics to its own taste. Rather than engaging with the workings of local ecology, it took a very anthropocentric view, stating that local ecology had a “stiff, somewhat inhospitable character” (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950, 3), but also that, “despite its hardly hospitable character still has a special charm, all its own” (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950, 4). It continued that “salt marshes, mud flats and reed lands do not only appear inhospitable, they indeed are” (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950, 4), and because this made them unsuitable for recreation, they needed to be improved.

The *stedenbouwkundige dienst*’s characterisation of the region as inhospitable is a value judgement; presumably the land is not inhospitable to the life that flourishes there. The stance that is expressed here is typical for its time. In the post-war years, many conservationists, even within the *Contact-Commissie*, emphasised the value of “recreation, aesthetics and newly developed knowledge on landscape types. To the new practices of landscape care and landscaping plans, too, the nature and shape of the area, the so-called cultural-historical value, and the attractiveness of the surroundings of citizens and visitors were central” (Van der Windt 1995, 129). Thus, at the time, in conservation efforts much depended on the aesthetic appeal of a certain area to humans.

In the face of this objective, local ecology sometimes had to suffer. Although the *stedenbouwkundige dienst* expressed a desire to keep the influences of industry and tourism far from the most ecologically rich areas, it drily remarked that in other places “the bird population shall have to try to find its nourishment elsewhere” (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950, 5). It also applauded the damming of the Den Briel Meuse, which would turn its salt water into fresh and provide for plant life:

Fortunately, the closure also provides quite new possibilities. The turning fresh of the Den Briel Meuse basin of course enables tree plantations as a new element to the river. Assuming the existing, valuable givens, such as a.o. the surprising run of the Meuse, it is now possible to build a whole new landscape, that is appropriate for the development of an intensive recreation area.

(Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst in Zuid-Holland. 1950, 4)

At the end of the report, the *stedenbouwkundige dienst* did not dwell much on the lost ecology of the area, instead, as far as nature is concerned, they are very optimistic about the future of De Beer as a newly beautified place: “The landscape to be created will be counted amongst the most beautiful ones in this region” (Van der Goes van Naters and De Wit 1959, 16).

Nature conservation in this document thus echoes contemporary Dutch ideas of conservation as to a large extent concerned with the management and development of beautiful landscapes. It should also be noted that conservation in the Netherlands is necessarily a practice that involves a high degree of human influence. Since prehistory, humans have actively shaped the appearance of the low-lying, fragile delta region, constructing dykes and drainage systems to keep them dry even before Roman times (Nienhuis 2008, 17). This has impacted the ecology to a very large extent. The cultivation of land even contributed to the establishment of a rich biodiversity that is unique in Europe (Schaminée et al. 2010, 11). As I have mentioned, this is very true of *De Beer*. Biologist V. Westhoff argued in 1945 that “In principle, . . . nature must live according to its own laws, but in the Netherlands this is impossible” (as cited in Van der Windt 1995, 84).

The enthusiasm regarding the development of new nature in the harbour has not lost any of its power since then, although of late there is more attention for restoration of original ecology than for landscapes that are primarily beautiful to human eyes. In 1994, the *Groenakkoord* (Green Agreement) decided that, in the Rotterdam harbour, 1750 ha of additional land should be dedicated to nature. Of these 1750 ha, 50 ha were to be located on the *Landtong Rozenburg* (Spit Rozenburg). On the *Landtong, Rijkswaterstaat*,⁵ *Havenbedrijf Rotterdam* (Port of Rotterdam Authority), the municipality of Rotterdam and the WWF work together to create what they call a “green stage in the harbour” (Landtong Rozenburg n.d.). This phrase also appears on informative signs placed on the Landtong. It echoes the language of the *Rapport*, in which repeated mention was made of a “wings-effect” that should be created in the landscape, referring to the wings of a theatre stage. This effect would be employed so that “plantation that is located farther away will also be given enough visual closure, retaining a large sense of visual depth.” As I mentioned before, nature then primarily existed for human pleasure, and this is made very clear in this passage. While aesthetic considerations have changed since then, the artificial dimension of nature is still celebrated in a similar way.

In the report *Van steenoever tot leefoever in Rotterdam* (From Stone Bank to Living Bank in Rotterdam), representatives of all four parties involved in the project wrote that the project is a way for companies to “show the world their green business card” (Hiddema, Van Leeuwen, Van Zonneveld, and Zwakhals 2014, 14). This sounds insincere, a cheap attempt at greenwashing. A large part of the Rotterdam harbour is taken up by the petro-industry, which today is regarded almost as the antithesis of anything green. However, it may be conversely argued that though they are not on equal footing yet, industry and ecology do try to come

together here. The parties propose to build dams to protect the *Landtong* ecology by warding off strong waves created by ships, which:

should not consist of new material, but of debris. And preferably debris that is released nearby . . . so that few transportation kilometres are needed. Because the lesser transportation, the lesser disturbance for the environment. And the lesser emission of carbon dioxide, the more sustainable the solution.

(Hiddema, Van Leeuwen, Van Zonneveld, and Zwakhals 2014, 13)

Whether this proposal is the most ecologically beneficial solution for this area can be contested. However, it indicates that there is a shift taking place in society's ecological consciousness that can think nature in unexpected places. Emma Marris (2011) argues that small strips of green space such as:

organic farms, industrial green space, and rambunctious home gardens, . . . provide one particular value better than anyplace else. These living slivers connect people to nature, and once people learn to love nature, they will be much more likely to support conservation efforts. They'll also be healthier and happier.

(Marris 2011, 150)

Indeed, for reasons of popular awareness of nature conservation, places like the *Landtong* are crucial because:

When conservationists focus on "pristine wilderness" only, they give people the impression that that's all that nature is. And so urban, suburban, and rural citizens believe that there is no nature where they live; that it is far away and not their concern. They can lose the ability to have spiritual and aesthetic experiences in more humble natural settings.

(Marris 2011, 150)

The language of power that I drew attention to before is still present in the report *Van steenoever tot leefoever*. The word *fierce*, however, which was used earlier to describe opposition to proposed actions, is now used to indicate improvement to *De Beer*. The *Rapport* of the *stedenbouwkundige dienst* had already noted that its plans for the area would mean that "The position of the municipality of Rozenburg will . . . be fiercely improved" (Provinciale stedenbouwkundige dienst 1950, 17). In a report for the project *Herinrichting Landtong Rozenburg* about natural growth of forests on the *Landtong*, the word is used again as its author asserts that "the grazing area on the *Landtong* has shown a fierce forest development in the last 15 years" (Linnartz 2014, 7). What we see here, as we did in Adriaan's engagement with people in distress, is power being used not to establish hierarchy, but rather as an embrace, a sign of love and an attempt to comfort. In this case, it is a double embrace: the harbour embraces nature, and nature, or its advocates, embraces, even celebrates, artificiality.

This is a sentiment that increasingly emerges in contemporary ecological debate, which is marked by a growing awareness that nature conservation has to see a major shift in the era that is referred to as the *Anthropocene* by many geologists. On her part, Marris continues her vindication of small-scale urban or rural ecology with a great sense of urgency:

If we fight to preserve only things that look like pristine wilderness, such as those places currently enclosed in national parks and similar refuges, our best efforts can only retard their destruction and delay the day we lose. If we fight to preserve and enhance nature as we have newly defined it, as the living background to human lives, we may be able to win. We may be able to grow nature larger than it currently is. This will not only require a change in our values but a change in our very aesthetics, as we learn to accept both nature that looks a little more lived-in than we are used to and working spaces that look a little more wild than we are used to.

(2011, 151)

Gaia Vince (2014), who also recognises that there is no going back to the methods of old, and that a major shift in conservation thought is necessary, similarly argues:

Nostalgia for the untamed rivers of the Holocene is a pointless sentiment that cannot and should not preserve them in the Anthropocene. Instead, we need to look dispassionately at the planet's great water courses and understand their interactions with ecosystems, chemical and physical cycles, and with the human populations living on their banks. Only then can decisions be made, by everyone concerned, about how we use our rivers – and how to supplement their capacity to meet our needs.

(Vince 2014, 105)

Something very interesting is happening here, as we can see literary ideas finding resonance in policy. Knickerbocker (2012) writes:

Instead of being merely a “device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language,” metaphor shapes our “ordinary conceptual system,” and thus “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”

(Knickerbocker 2012, 4–5)

In this chapter I have shown that the language and motifs used in the novel *De Jacobs ladder* return in the language used by today's policy makers. Our language does shape our world, and parallels can be drawn between the ways we write about our rivers imaginatively and the ways in which we engage with them practically; how we develop river banks to serve us economically, and how we try in

return, as we move increasingly consciously into the era called the Anthropocene, to serve them ecologically. On this note, I would like to return to the wise words of Adriaan's grandfather that I cited before:

Look . . . that's what I mean, you're always being tricked, but it doesn't matter, because now it's summer and the sun is shining, and if you smell very carefully you can feel the autumn coming. Soon, the migratory birds will come over, and it will be winter and you will have the most beautiful sunsets of the year, and maybe you can go skating. And then spring will come again.
(Hart 1986, 108)

Notes

- 1 The translations of *De Jacobs ladder* and other Dutch texts are my own.
- 2 Lambertus Gerardus Cornelis Ledebøer (1808–1863) was a preacher whose career was marked by many conflicts in different Protestant Churches. His ideas were highly conservative; he opposed singing in church and any kind of governmental influence on church affairs.
- 3 In my translations of Bible verses, I have referred to the King James Bible. This version gives the names of the birds as “the cormorant and the bittern” which is in discord with the Statenvertaling, the Dutch translation used by protestant congregations in the Netherlands and ‘t Hart in this novel. I have changed the species in my citation to reflect the Dutch translation, as this is relevant to the reflections of Adriaan's grandfather.
- 4 For all quotations from the Bible in *Jacob's Ladder*, I have referred to the King James Bible for my translations. This last verse, however, I have translated myself from the Dutch. The King James translation of this verse, “thou hast in love to my soul *delivered it from the pit of corruption*” (Isaiah 38:17), is very different from the Dutch translation and does not fit the context of the novel well.
- 5 Rijkswaterstaat is the executive arm of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment which is concerned with water management.

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