The individual
Coreferaat Arnon Grunberg Van der Leeuw-lezing 2010

Pieter Broertjes, the former chief editor of the Volkskrant, sent me an e-mail on 20 April of this year asking me to be second speaker at the 2010 Van der Leeuw Lecture.
'The keynote speaker is Ilija Troyanov,' he wrote. 'Do you know him? His lecture has the working title "Requiem On The Future". He's currently writing a novel with the same title. The theme is climate change and the crisis of civilization.' I had never read anything by Ilija Troyanov, which says a great deal about my reading breadth and nothing about Troyanov. The main reason why I said yes to Broertjes' request was out of sympathy for the person who'd made it.
I said yes in the way you say yes to a friend who asks you to help them move house. It's not until you see the boxes that you realize just what you've let yourself in for. It was several weeks before I read Broertjes' email again. Only then did the words 'crisis of civilization' really register. You would have to be very shallow-minded to assert that there is no crisis. You couldn't possibly say that all is fine and dandy.
I've heard the word 'crisis' for as long as I can remember (I was born in 1971, just before the first oil crisis). It's always been there. And because it's always there, or rather, because the word is constantly being bandied about, it's become less and less clear what exactly we mean when we talk about crisis.
Crisis is our modus vivendi – our political, social and economic systems function because of crisis, not in spite of it. We act in the name of crisis, or to be more precise, we act in the name of combating crisis.
Although crisis causes unease and crops up constantly in our discourse, it is difficult to maintain that our lives are characterized by affliction and deprivation. Relatively speaking, most of us lead fairly pleasant and agreeable lives. At most, we know about the real crisis from newspapers or television. In other words, we know it through hearsay, and yet we're still inclined to talk about it as though we were personally affected.
I suspect that deeply embedded in our culture is a guilt from which we are unable to free ourselves (humanity's wickedness seems to be the dogma of secularized citizens too), which makes us feel that we should do something about the supposed crisis.
The ideal of civilization makes us feel responsible for wrongs, even if we can do little or nothing to change them. The only way to rid ourselves of this stringent, rather abstract obligation is to no longer see ourselves as being guilty of the wrongs, but as victims.
Lamenting our woes doesn't oblige us to do anything.
It is useful to remember here that victims have acquired a special status at the present time. The writer Romain Gary commented that: 'All major movements in history begin and end with victims.' Victims have privileges and a certain mystique (and we shouldn't underestimate the latter), which we would all like to have. We prefer not to grant these privileges to real victims like refugees. For understandable reasons, we prefer to keep them for ourselves.
In the story we tell about the crisis, we gradually appropriate for ourselves the status of victimhood – refugees are a nuisance. We suffer from this nuisance so it is we who are the victims of refugees.
Underlying this supposed victimhood is – almost invariably – an intolerable guilt that we wish to be rid of. In brief, the crisis of civilization is us. And if it's not us, we'd like it to become us. In his lecture, Ilija Troyanov aptly described this attitude to life as 'the feeling of being a plague' – as humans, as a species.
My first thought on reading Troyanov's lecture was to take his words literally and talk about this plague – to appear here as a plague, to explore what it means to be seen as a plague, by yourself and by others.
Doubt set in almost at once. Not because I instinctively disagree with Troyanov's diagnosis, but because I began to ask myself what position you're adopting if you present the whole of humanity as a plague. Are you not then presenting yourself as the physician who diagnoses the illness? You cannot be both illness and physician at one and the same time. What's more, we mustn't rule out a physician's hidden agenda, one that may even be hidden from physicians themselves.
There are people who really are seen as a plague: refugees, immigrants, people who are here illegally. In his book Homo Sacer, the philosopher Agamben emphasizes the fact that the Nazis

did not send Jews to the extermination camps until they had taken away their citizenship and nationality.
Refugees, people who – for whatever reason – no longer have a passport, who do not enjoy the protection of the state because they are not citizens, are usually seen as a plague, despite the fact that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is supposed to look after their welfare. They are not wanted, and the fact that they often do receive rudimentary help doesn't stop them not being wanted, doesn't stop them being viewed as a plague.
Taking away someone's passport is never a purely administrative measure. It places that person outside the law; as Agamben writes, under Roman law they are the ones who cannot be sacrificed but whom anyone may kill with impunity.
Reducing the whole of humanity to a plague means denying a small but growing group of people – refugees.
It is my unproven hypothesis that novelists are just that little bit less happy than other people and that they like to impose their gloomy view of the world on their readers. The fact that they sometimes succeed and that they are rewarded for doing so may say something about their rhetorical talent, but more particularly it says something about their readership, who have a need for drama.
Literature clearly satisfies a need. It tends to emphasize people's unhappiness, humanity's depravity. Aristotle mentioned a reason for this in his Poetics. He said that the aim of tragedy is to evoke fear and pity in the audience, who then experience a catharsis through these emotions. Catharsis literally means 'purification' but in practice it boils down to something like being reconciled to your fate. Happiness won't evoke fear and pity in the audience; for that, you need its opposite – there has to be a crisis.
I do not favour a therapeutic view of literature, but it does appear obvious that reading novels has a similar effect to group therapy. You finish a book and say: 'My life could be a lot worse.' Although we do our best to eliminate risk and we ask of the government what we once asked of the gods – deliver us from risk, give us our certainties – we are aware at the same time, even if just at a subconscious level, how fragile these certainties are and how easily our stability can prove illusory. Reading a story about the blackest scenario, a story in which our fears become reality, allows readers to 'let off steam'. I don't find Aristotle's analyses outdated, although many would comment that a novelist's blackest scenarios, which is what Troyanov has shown us, have been outdone by reality.
Apart from writing novels and stories, writers increasingly play the role of public intellectual. They are then not telling a story in the romantic (or novelistic) sense of the word, they are presenting an argument. This is remarkable. You then ask: what is a novelist's expertise based on? Some novelists are doctors or scientists, but only a handful. Some are good readers, but once again, just a handful. Writers are seldom able to shed a refreshing light on their own work.
Novelists who play the role of intellectual, however temporarily, appear to base their authority on their pessimism, on their well-intentioned but always somewhat desperate warnings. Slowly but surely, they become caught up in the role that they have created for themselves; they can't toss their sombre message overboard because that's what their authority rests on. The audience hasn't come to hear that everything is hunky-dory. The novelists' right to speak is bound up with their message – the fact that they have come to explain to us the parlous state of the world.
Writers have degenerated into priests without God, or literature has become their god. They do what is expected of them: they hold an edifying talk – vilifying humanity can be regarded as edifying – and then everyone can go home and be relieved to discover that things at home are nowhere near as bad as the priest has made them out to be.
Let's begin with practical objections to the role of writer as priest. If we need a priest, we should go to a real one – there are still plenty of them about.
There is an ambiguous dimension to the apparent masochism of the reading public who let themselves be told how bad people are. They don't really believe in the writer as father confessor. At best, the writer is a fetish, an object of transient, superstitious idolatry. To quote Multatuli, who addresses his readers directly in Love Letters (Minnebrieven): 'I have the power to stroke and tickle you until you are so crazy that you forget the price of coffee, you, who otherwise are so thick-skinned that it makes the whip moan.'

Multatuli knew, and this was something he repeatedly aired his frustration about, that it was not the writer who controlled this mildly erotic game between writer and reader. Writers are hired to tickle their audience with a whip. The fact that Multatuli regularly compared writers with prostitutes won't surprise anyone. He understood that behind every moralizer there all too often lurks a prostitute, who believes – off her own bat and guided by lofty, moral reasons – that she has to flagellate her audience and who only realizes once she gets home that she did precisely what was expected of her. And that people enjoyed it, the tickle of the whip and forgetting for a moment the price of coffee.

There is another reason why I have objections to the writer as secular priest.

I think that most of us would take the position that we're not really so bad. So if we hear about someone who is a plague, we're inclined to think that people are referring to our neighbour, which is probably correct – perhaps we did on one occasion fuck our best friend's girlfriend, but we've more than made amends for that. If we have something in common, it is that we have learned to suppress our own wishes and desires and to regard them as something despicable. We are conditioned to make sacrifices for others: our children, our family, our parents, and if necessary fairly abstract idols such as freedom or the state. I don't wish to gloss over people's egocentric core, and these sacrifices undoubtedly bring us some result, but at the same time we can't deny that most people do their best every day to do the right thing, or at the very least, they try to please others.

And yet we cannot help but feel that we are sinners, that we are guilty – despite the fact that we live in a supposedly secularized society.

What's more, we have become so accustomed to the platitude that civilization is only a thin veneer that we pretend that this veneer no longer exists. Emphasizing how uncivilized humanity is has become a ritual that at most preserves the status quo.

The writer who plays the secular priest presents a spectacle that is seemingly driven by engagement and moral concerns, but which in essence is a form of eroticism, with both parties – writer and reader – having an interest in disguising the true nature of their transaction.

I did not intend, this much is now clear, to join in this erotic transaction. I had no intention of entertaining you with a whip. Instead, I wanted to explain that the history of civilization, or modern Western history at any rate, is made up of descriptions of the crisis of civilization, that that crisis is a permanent one and that we need it – it gives us something to hold on to, it gives us an identity.

By no means do I wish to downplay climate change, but I do want to point out that the need for and the call for action is perhaps prompted more by a need to rid ourselves of that feeling of guilt than by a real concern about the effects that this action might have. In the wake of the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, the New York Times reported that the greatest damage caused by oil disasters occurs during clean-up operations.

It sounds awful, but perhaps doing nothing sometimes does the least damage.

In other words, it was my intention to present myself to you as a bastard; anyone who denies the crisis must be a bastard.

But because I like people to think that I'm a clever bastard, I thought about the arguments you could put forward against what I'm saying.

There were quite a few. I only had to look at the papers to find them.

I read Troyanov's text once more. He ended it with the desperate lament: 'What can literature do but describe the individual who resists?'

Whereas the word 'crisis' started out as a catch-all term into which you could throw whatever you liked, after carefully reading Troyanov's argument I realized that we can offer a proper description for the crisis that he's talking about. The climate disaster is more a motif than a theme in his lecture, more an illustration of a thesis than the thesis itself.

What I understood from Troyanov's argument was that the crux of the crisis is our lack of a common language in which to conduct a meaningful debate.

'Now it's already too late,' Troyanov said.

His final comments make it clear that as far as he is concerned all arguments have come too late. And even if the arguments of a single individual could persuade people, the actions of that individual would be no more than a drop in the ocean.

Above all else, what shines through Troyanov's conclusion is his doubt about a shared reasonableness.

Indeed, reasonableness is nowhere to be seen. These days it's all about silencing, about destroying our opponent – not in a military but in a sporting sense of the word, in the way that football teams or tennis players wipe out their opponents.
Public debate has become a football match in which spectators have started behaving like football supporters. People don't hone their ideas on their opponent's arguments, they sharpen their teeth on their enemy's flesh.
Debate has become entertainment, and entertainment is characterized by a wish to be accessible to all. Entertainment is all about making everyone happy. And what is accessible to all is better than what is accessible to a select few. Exclusion is undemocratic, unless we're talking about other people, about people from outside, about people who don't belong.
We could call this crisis a crisis of faith. This term is associated with religion, but we seem to have forgotten that, in order to be able to function, social institutions also rely on citizens' trust, a trust that differs little from faith.
The tragedy of this vanished trust is played out on three different levels. First, there is a lack of trust in our opponent, with whom we believe we no longer have anything in common. That's why the enemy must disappear or adapt so much that they become invisible. Of course, this latter option leads to new tensions: the problem with an invisible enemy is that they could be anywhere. There are increasing calls for harsher penalties and more police, but at one and the same time public confidence in the law is being eroded as never before.
The application of the law is hopelessly arbitrary. Just think of popular opinion about bankers, which isn't entirely unfounded. Bankers failed us; they behaved irresponsibly and in most cases were rewarded for their failure. The saying 'we are equal before the law' has become as meaningful as 'God is love'.
More importantly, it isn't clear what law we're talking about. The law of the enemy, we keep hearing, is threatening to disrupt, to devour our own law. So there are two laws, perhaps more, and we seek to prove the superiority of our law by adhering to a tradition that we barely know. We hear terms like Judeo-Christian tradition, Europe, humanism, enlightenment.
Kafka's story 'Before the law' begins like this: 'Before the law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the law.'
For Kafka the law was still something that you could stand before. The law is not vested in the man, nor in the guardian of the law, but is located somewhere behind that guardian.
From the idea that our own law is better than someone else's to the belief that someone can be the law is not a big step. In the name of the crisis, we have removed the distinction between the guardians of the law and the law itself. The result is that the law no longer puts an end to arbitrary situations but upholds that arbitrariness by lawful means. We have become the guardian, the law and the man from the country who seeks access to the law.
There is also distrust vis-à-vis the state. The state is the latest addition to the pantheon of fallen idols. Although we make use of government services, we do not trust the government. This is comparable to the process of secularization. The rituals are still performed, it's just belief that's missing.
In a world of complete mistrust, any demand that we make is justified and any demand made on us is by definition suspect: who are they to demand something of me?
The more that trust in the state is eroded, the more the state will be compelled to use force against its citizens to compensate for citizens' diminished belief in its institutions. And the more the state seeks refuge in violence, the more citizens will be prepared to use violence against the state.
When the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt spoke in the German parliament on 28 October 1969 about 'daring more democracy', responding among other things to the student protests, it was the hierarchical structures that symbolized all things reactionary, everything that had collaborated with the Nazis and which, deep within, had remained Nazi.
Authority had proved to be hollow; a different authority was needed to take its place.
It is remarkable that 2 June 1967 does not count as an historic date. It was on that day, during riots triggered by the Shah's visit to Berlin, that the student Benno Ohnesorg was murdered by police. This murder seemed to confirm the suspicion that a totalitarian monster dwelled at the heart of liberal democracy. The power structures of the state had to be dismantled. Because the state was still fascist to the core.

And when the public prosecutor Siegfried Buback was murdered by the Red Army Faction on 7 April 1977, the Austrian poet Erich Fried, who was extremely popular at that time, wrote: 'It would have been better/ if such a man/ hadn't died like that. // It would have been better/ if a man / hadn't lived like that.' (Er wäre besser gewesen/ so ein Mensch/ wäre nicht so gestorben. // Es wäre besser gewesen/ ein Mensch/ hätte nicht so gelebt.)
I am not quoting Fried in order to retrospectively cry shame about the ambivalent tone of these lines – ambivalence is readily equated with moral relativism and general weakness. No, I'm quoting Fried to illustrate how greatly the intelligentsia were divided about the spectre of revolution that appeared once again to be haunting Europe. Although the methods were condemned, it was difficult to deny the correctness of their basic intuitions – that at the heart of the Federal Republic, and therefore at the heart of every Western democracy, the old monster still lurked. Behind the noble justifications that politicians used to defend their policies, there lay concealed the law of the elite, which in practice was the law of the jungle. This law did not protect the interests of the people, but of a small but privileged minority.
When Willy Brandt spoke about daring more democracy, not only for the Federal Republic, but for all of Western Europe (and the word 'dare' clearly shows that he knew he was taking a risk), he couldn't possibly have known that he would be opening the doors of hell, and we have yet to see the final act of the comic opera that could be performed because of this opening.
Once the hollowness of the state was revealed, those who opposed the state proved to be no less hollow; they were perhaps even more so. The totalitarian monster existed not only in the state but also in those who wished to destroy the monster. Terrorism in the name of the revolution was adventurism.
We can say the same about terrorism today, that it is essentially nothing more than adventurism – extremely violent adventurism, which claims to combat modernity but which itself is ultramodern, and riddled with the diseases that it says it wants to eradicate.
It seems nothing can escape this hollowness.
In a world devoid of reasonableness, in which humanity has identified itself as a plague and where humanism no longer suffices as an ideal, it is clear to Troyanov what literature can do: describe the individual who resists. But there is also something outside literature. And Troyanov has the following to say about this: 'The only power in the world that is powerful, rich and clever enough to change this situation is the power that has brought about this situation. It will change nothing and must therefore be combated.'
The original German reads as follows: 'Das wird sie nicht tun, also muß sie überwunden werden.' Defeating something (überwinden) is not the same as combating it.
If we take Troyanov's text seriously, we can't simply ignore the subtle but still fairly unambiguous call to revolution with which he ends his argument.
Having diagnosed the illness ('the diseases of capitalism are called consumption and waste'), Troyanov says – and I'll repeat it because it's very easy to overlook the explosive content of his words – that the only power in the world that is powerful, rich and clever enough to change this situation is the power that has brought that situation about. As this power won't change of its own accord, it must be defeated. How this can be achieved, Troyanov doesn't say. But he leaves us in no doubt that the status quo cannot continue.
Historians will probably point out that revolutions are generally accompanied by violence, that powers as great as the ones Troyanov is talking about seldom implode without violence or politely relinquish their power, but I'm not concerned here with exploring the extent to which a call to revolution is a call to violence.
There is something unusual going on with Troyanov's appeal to himself and to us. The appeal is embedded in an argument that deals with a novel in progress. The fact that the writer of that novel is constantly reflecting on the world around him during the creation process doesn't detract from what dominates Troyanov's argument, from where his true interest appears to lie: the novel that he is writing, the novel that begins with a nightmare.
It would appear that lectures are prompted by e-mails making a friendly request and that novels begin with dreams or nightmares. Or as Troyanov says: 'Perhaps that's what drives literature, that we do something with the passions of our youth.' According to Troyanov, and also to others, literature has a childish core. We shouldn't think of a child as symbolizing innocence, but rather

disinterested playfulness. By that I mean a playfulness that is concerned only with playfulness itself.
Writing a novel is not the most obvious choice if you want to take a stand against the powers that have our world in their grip. Those wanting revolution take to the streets; they don't sit at their computers for months, perhaps even years, in the company of fictional characters, however much those characters might make pronouncements about the world in which we are obliged to live.
The social position of writers, or the political power they wield, is open to debate. Even if I think of great writers like Flaubert, Hemingway or Coetzee, I believe that the political power of novelists is extremely limited.
Norman Mailer once ran for mayor of New York, Vargas Llosa wanted to be president of Peru. Both were unsuccessful and, as far as I know, Mailer and Vargas Llosa confined themselves to literature after that.
The fact that their power is limited is also due to the public. In notes accompanying the fourth edition of Max Havelaar in 1857, Multatuli wrote: 'Most readers seemed to believe that I had exposed myself and my loved ones to poverty, humiliation and death in order to provide them with such pleasant reading material.'
Multatuli addresses this theme even more explicitly in the first tale of Love Letters (Minnebrieven). A well-dressed man walks along the canals in Amsterdam. A child falls into the water. The mother screams, and jumps in after the child. After she has rescued her child, the man comes up to her and says: 'I heard how you screamed, madam... I have come to offer you a role in the theatre.' Multatuli continues: 'The poor mother! The man was an impresario who was looking for characters. His name was The public.'
I don't know whether Troyanov is familiar with the work of Multatuli, but it seems to me that no-one writing in 2010 can deny the accuracy of Multatuli's analysis. When writers believe they are making a cry for help, the public hears an aria. Once the performance is over, the audience will at most differ about the quality of the performance.
I don't wish to assert with these comments that novels are solely aesthetic creations. Novels are embedded in society, readers assign meaning to them and in that sense novels may also be something political. But this is not to say that writers possess political power. As I have tried to demonstrate, when they think they are taking a director's role, writers are more an instrument than a conductor, more an object than a subject.
For this reason alone we shouldn't make too much of the novelist's engagement. We've heard so much about this in the Netherlands in recent years, albeit in a small circle as novels are such a marginal phenomenon. Engagement should in fact be put in brackets. A novelist's 'engagement' is a tool that serves the novel. The more this engagement serves a purpose outside the novel, such as an ideology, the poorer the novel itself will be.
Perhaps the engagement of every citizen should be put in inverted commas. We should at least stop automatically regarding it as something positive. As far back as the eighteenth century, the philosopher and physician Bernard Mandeville wrote in his essay Charity and charity-schools: 'Charity, where it is too extensive, seldom fails of promoting Sloth and Idleness, and is good for little in the Commonwealth but to breed Drones and destroy Industry.'
It is our tendency to overestimate the positive effects of so-called virtues and to underestimate the positive effects of so-called vices. We are also inclined to view art in general and novel writing in particular as a cure-all, something that will and should improve us.
It is therefore hardly surprising that political power seeks to don the refined garb of the artist. Some famous dictators were artists manqués. Hitler is a well-known example. Less well-known is the fact that Stalin started off as a poet and that Saddam wrote novels. Politics as the continuation of art by other means, the aestheticization of politics – this is a feature of fascism. By aestheticization, however, we shouldn't think just in terms of carefully orchestrated mass meetings of Nazis to which the label 'Wagnerian' can be applied. We should think of a debate that adopts the form and content of a soap. A twittering politician is an aestheticized politician.
Totalitarian states are inclined to persecute and murder writers because of what they write. But this doesn't count as proof of the political power of writers. The state's fear of its citizens says much more about the powerlessness of the state than it does about the power of its citizens.
In this context I'd like to point to the Russian writer Isaak Babel, who was murdered in 1940 by Stalin's secret police. During a conference of Soviet writers in 1934, Babel declared that he had

become a master in a new literary genre, the genre of silence. Troyanov does not wish to use that genre. He has many doubts, he foresees our downfall – and here I should add that for as long as humanity has existed we have feared and foreseen our own downfall. Troyanov knows that the writer occupies a marginal position, at the periphery of society, and yet he does not doubt novel writing. In that sense he was right when he said in an interview that he is not necessarily a pessimist: true pessimists do not write novels.

The most important question that Troyanov's text raises is how we should understand the call to revolution from someone who doesn't believe in the conditions for making that revolution come about. Trust in arguments is absent, and we have no reason to assume that Troyanov believes in demagoguery or violence.

As is often the case, Troyanov's decision to choose literature will be a last resort, a move of desperation. A move away from the impasse which I can simply summarize as 'what can I do, knowing that I can do nothing?'

But it's a move that has unexpected consequences.

Let's take another look at Troyanov's beautiful and intriguing final sentence, which his argument works towards from the very first line: 'What can literature do but describe the individual who resists?' The question now is whether writers should believe that their readers, having read these descriptions of resistance, will themselves go on to resist.

I don't believe they will. I can discern a desperate irony in Troyanov's appeal. He realizes that the novelist is part and parcel of the powers that have brought about this situation and that diagnosing and analysing the crisis will simply strengthen these powers.

In a world where hollowness is the norm, writers – certainly if they leave what is by definition the ambivalent world of the novel – call into question the position from which they speak. They must cast doubt on their own authority and if necessary undermine it. Ultimately they can serve no other purpose than to express the essence of the novel – disinterested playfulness.

This is not a playfulness that rules out moral questions; it is a playfulness that allows moral questions to be asked without wanting to give an immediate answer, a playfulness which permits the asking of moral questions that elsewhere would disturb the peace.

Here I would like to slightly modify Troyanov's final line: literature must describe the individual. I don't really care whether or not that individual resists.

The Second World War has taught us that the perpetrators were able to get away with what they did because bystanders looked the other way. This suggests that there is little difference between perpetrators and people who avert their gaze. Denying that difference is immoral.

I cannot demand resistance from someone else, I can only say this: a civilized state gives its citizens an opportunity to be indifferent without making them accomplices to a crime.

Thank you.