

The Discordant Narrative: An Analysis of the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’

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The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is a historical canon that comprises the fifty most important items – *vensters* – of Dutch national history (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 34). These fifty items are a mix of chronologically ordered individuals, events, documents, and inventions that are taught to students from age 7-14 in primary and secondary schools. The direct reason for the formulation of the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ – which I will from now on refer to as the canon - was a report that was published by the Dutch Board of Education in 2005. This report concluded that knowledge of Dutch history and culture has severely declined in the Dutch population (Grever et al. 2006, 107). The canon was supposed to fill this knowledge lacuna by formulating the ‘valuable parts of our culture and history that we want to pass on to new generations through education’.¹ Next to its function in formal education, the canon is used throughout Dutch society. Cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums, are encouraged to work with the canon, and the canon has an elaborate website which is meant for ‘all people interested in Dutch culture and history’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science has made available 20.000 canon booklets to be handed out to individuals that have just acquired Dutch citizenship (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). Clearly, the canon is intended to be prominently present in Dutch society, as the main document that tells the Dutch story (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 12).

The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ exists among many other nationally centred historical narratives. The dominance of the nation-state in modern European historiographies is not coincidental. The professionalisation of the historical discipline coincided with processes of nationalisation in the period from 1750 onwards (Berger 2017). New nations recognised the potential of national history-writing for collective identity construction and hence historians were encouraged to make the nation the focal point of their research. Also, well before this period, locally and regionally centred historical narratives were already ubiquitous (Enenkel and Ottenheim 2017). In this sense, the Dutch canon is not a new phenomenon. The canon is not unique either; England, Spain, France, and the United States have similar nationally oriented history curricula, which are justified with arguments similar to those used in the Dutch case. (Létourneau 2017). It is clear that the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is part of a larger genre of historical narratives that take the nation as their focal point.

The canon was not unequivocally received. The criticisms of the canon are as widespread as its use. Criticism has come from the public, academia, and history teachers and has targeted the content, the form, and the intention of the canon, as well as the political decision that lies behind its formulation. Upon these criticisms, the canon was revised, and a new version was presented in the summer of 2020. The main aim of the revision was to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of ‘stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society’, as well as to pay more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). The revision consisted of the substitution of some, and a rewriting of all of the items (Funnekotter 2020). The form of the canon was not changed. The canon still consists of chronologically ordered events that tell the history of the Netherlands from the Dutch perspective, starting with a description of its first inhabitants and ending with a description of its present ones.

Paul Ricoeur, who has extensively written on (historical) narration, describes a diffe-

¹ This quote was translated from Dutch. The original quote was the following: ‘die waardevolle onderdelen van onze cultuur en geschiedenis die we via het onderwijs aan nieuwe generaties willen meegeven’. (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006)

rence between a course of events and the telling of these events. Historical events, according to Ricoeur, are configured to have specific meanings in an overarching narrative. This process of configuration is also termed *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1984, 66). For Ricoeur, there exists a loop of narrative interpretation, akin to the hermeneutic circle, in which the whole influences the parts that make up this whole (Meretoja 2014). In historical narratives, meanings can be assigned to events explicitly, as for instance in cases when certain events are defined as ‘breaks’ or ‘turning points’. However, meaning is also assigned implicitly. Narrative interpretation does not happen in a vacuum, rather it is influenced by implicit *models of sense-making* that are specific to our temporal and cultural situatedness. As Ricoeur states: ‘The reader is pointed toward the sort of figure that likens the narrated events to a narrative form that our culture has made us familiar with.’ (Ricoeur 1988, 153). These implicit *models of sense-making* thus function as *narrative templates* that all participate in what is termed a *cultural memory* (Dessingué 2017). One component that is prevalent in the cultural memory of western societies is the idea of coherence or unity (Maan 2015). Indeed, characters in stories are often expected to behave in a coherent or consistent manner. Characters can of course act in ways that do not conform to this expected coherence, but these actions will then be interpreted *as deviations* (Maan 2015).

In this essay, I will use Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory to analyse the implications that narrative elements have on the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ and its ambition to do justice to the plurality of the Dutch past. In the first part of this paper, I will present Ricoeur’s narrative theory. I will explain how the meaning, function, and importance of (historical) events are influenced by their being put in an overarching narrative through the concepts of *prefiguration* and *configuration*. Then, I will show in more detail how this happens in the Canon of the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will briefly point out the main criticisms that were raised against the first version of the canon, after which I will describe, in general, the revisions that were made as a response to these criticisms. After the revision, many criticisms were not solved. Using Ricoeur’s narrative theory I will try to explain why this is the case. Lastly, I will critique the feasibility of the ambition of the Dutch government to formulate a national canon that will truly represent the plurality of the Dutch past.

1. Paul Ricoeur on Narration

In narrative theory, narration is generally defined as the practice of making sense of the world via storytelling. A story, defined as a description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events, differs from a mere succession of events. By making a story out of a succession, meaningful connections between events are created, rendering them intelligible (Meretoja 2014). In a story, one event happens *because* of another, not merely *after* another.

Within narrative theory, two important views can be identified. In one view, narration is seen as a way by which humans confer meaning onto their experiences *retrospectively*. The idea is that human’s immediate or primary experiences are fundamentally chaotic and meaningless. Through narration, meaning and order is conferred onto these primary experiences, making them intelligible. However, by doing this narrative ultimately distorts reality. Since, through narration, *false* order and meaning is conferred onto a reality that is fundamentally chaotic and meaningless. Within this view narrative is evaluated both positively and negatively. On the one hand, it is emphasized that the process of narration is useful and necessary in making sense of the world. On the other hand, it is stressed that by doing this, narrative distorts reality.

Contrary to this view, the hermeneutic-phenomenological view states that humans always already observe the world in a meaningful way. The hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition states that all experience is characterized by interpretation and rejects the notion of immediate or primary chaotic experience devoid of interpretation. In this tradition, narrative and experience are not separated since they are thought to mutually influence each other. Human interpretations are influenced by existing narratives. The way we experience the world is therefore dependent on existing narratives. These narratives are in their turn influenced by

experience. In this sense, meaning and order are not imposed on experience through narrative retrospectively. Rather, the specific order and meaning our experiences already have, are influenced by narrative, which is in its turn influenced by experience. Consequently, the claim that narrative understanding inevitably distorts reality is rejected in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition.

Paul Ricoeur's analysis of narrative is part of the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. Hence, narrative is considered by Ricoeur to characterize the human way of experiencing and therefore the human way of being. For Ricoeur, this means that narrative is not only important due to its ubiquitous presence in the human world. Rather, narrative is considered to be constitutive of human existence, thereby becoming ontologically important. Ricoeur's analysis covers narration in its broad sense and describes how narrative is present in many spheres of human reality, from everyday reality to fiction and the telling of history.

1.1 Prefiguration and the Semantics of Action

Ricoeur describes that all human experience is characterized by culturally and historically mediated interpretation (Meretoja 2014). Humans, according to Ricoeur, are embedded in symbolic wholes that confer an initial readability to the world (Dowling 2011). This idea provides the grounds for Ricoeur's concept of *prefiguration*. Ricoeur describes that human in their daily lives understand each other through a *semantics of action* (Dowling 2011, 59). By this he means that humans understand each other's actions in terms of motives, intentions, and beliefs, thereby making these actions meaningful and hence readable. In this sense, single actions and events are bound together by a story. For example, if someone sees me on an early morning, walking at a slow pace and constantly yawning before entering a coffee shop to buy a large cup of coffee, she will probably interpret my actions the following way: 'It is still early, so she is tired and craving a cup of coffee that will wake her up a bit before her working day starts.' In the example, the observer makes sense of my actions intuitively by ascribing probable motives to my actions, resulting in an explanation that is in a simple sense already a story. Ricoeur calls this process of sensemaking the 'pre narrative level of understanding' or *prefiguration* (Ricoeur 1984, 54). Prefiguration, like all other forms of interpretation, is influenced by historical and cultural factors, causing the probability of certain ascribed motives and intentions to be varied across times and cultures. Going back to the example, it might be the case that I was walking home after a night of partying and the coffee I bought was not for me but for my partner who I knew was going to wake up soon. In the Netherlands this would not be a very probable scenario. In a city like Berlin however, where weekday partying is much more common, it would be. In the process of prefiguration, actions are connected through probable motives. Thereby prefiguration makes an intelligible whole of what would otherwise be a heterogeneous sequence of actions. The choice for particular motives is influenced by cultural and historical factors. Hence, what is taken to be an intelligible whole varies across times and cultures as well.² For Ricoeur, what remains constant across times and cultures is that, through prefiguration, a disorderly – or *discordant* – chain of events is grasped together producing an orderly whole – or *concordance*. Therefore, Ricoeur describes the product of the process of prefiguration to be a 'discordant concordance'. Although Ricoeur stresses that the product of prefiguration can differ across times and cultures – i.e., what is considered to be an orderly or intelligible whole differs – he claims the basic notion of prefiguration to be universal for humans. In line with the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition, Ricoeur claims that humans cannot escape from interpreting human actions in terms of volition, motive, and aim, making human action irreducibly narrative.

² Kenneth J. Gergen refers to this by using the phrase 'communities of intelligibility' (Gergen 2005).

1.2 Configuration and Emplotment

Ricoeur explains, with the concept of *prefiguration*, that actions occurring in day-to-day life are interpreted through narrative. He supplements his analysis by investigating the actions and events that occur in actual stories. For Ricoeur, the whole of the story and hence its end are always already implied. Therefore, actions and events in a story come to have a forward movement, that is, a movement towards a certain end (Dowling 2011, 18). This forward movement becomes particularly visible in the strong notion of causality implied in stories. One event does not merely follow the other in a process of succession, rather, it follows *because* of the other in a process of causation. It is important to note that Ricoeur is very precise in his use of the notion of causality. The causality conferred to a chain of events through the process of emplotment is a causality that is rooted in volition and motive, which stand in relation to social and cultural reality. He refers to this form of causality as *narrative causality*, which is different from *physical causality*, by which the causality of processes in the material world that can be described by Newtonian mechanics is meant (Dowling 2011, 64).³ Narrative causality concerns the binding together of events that seem heterogeneous into an intelligible whole. Ricoeur says:

‘[...] *the recounted story is always more than the enumeration, in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole.*’ (Ricoeur 1991, 20).

Hence, stories do not only confer meanings to events in relation to the end but also in relation to each other and to the whole, causing the events to be *configured* into the story. This process of configuration, by which events come to have specific meanings and functions with respect to the overarching narrative is also termed *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1991). In a sense, emplotment is already present in day-to-day pre narrative understanding – or prefiguration – which happens through the creation of mini or proto plots consisting of day-to-day activities. The difference here lies in the reader or observer already being aware of the narrative as a whole with an end, causing the continuous implication that the plot is already there (Ricoeur 1991; Dowling 2011, 20). Through prefiguration, a plot is *created*, through configuration, a plot *unfolds*. The notion of the unfolding of an already existing plot becomes exceptionally clear through the feeling of predestination one often gets upon reaching the end of a story. When the end of a story is reached, no other end seems possible: ‘it could not have been otherwise’ is a phrase that is often heard. Since the whole is already present, the reader is aware of the functionality or meaning of the narrated events. The precise function may of course not be clear, but the expectancy of function or meaning is unmistakably present.

“[...] *an event is more than an occurrence; I mean more than something that just happens; it is what contributes to the progress of the narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end.*” (Ricoeur 1991, 21).

The expectation of functionality brings with it the possibility of granting actions and events a degree of importance. Going back to the coffee example, when a person observes me walking, yawning, and buying a coffee, she has no means to assess whether these actions will play an important part in my day. However, when I tell a friend about my morning, she would be able to tell the importance of me buying a cup of coffee by paying attention to, say, the level of detail and the time of narration.⁴ After all, it would not make a lot of sense to devote a large propor-

3 Ricoeur notices that in historical reasoning, these two kinds of causality are often mixed. He accuses historians of taking the notion of material causality to apply to social reality, which he regards a category mistake (Dowling 2011, 64).

4 The fraction between the time of narration – *Erzählzeit* – and the narrated time – *erzählte Zeit* – is often indicates the importance of an event. A short event - in the sense of narrated time - that is elaborately described –

tion of a story to describe in detail an event that is of minimal importance to the plot.⁵ Ricoeur describes this synthesis of events according to their relevance to the plot in the following way:

“[...] retelling a story best reveals this synthetic activity at work in composition, to the extent that we are less captivated by the unexpected aspects of the story and more attentive to the way in which it leads to its conclusion.” (Ricoeur 1991, 22)

In this sense, stories also *select* events; they attract and repel individual events to serve the plot. In short, through the process of emplotment, events are gathered into a single totality – the story – and are thereby configured to have a certain meaning, function, degree of importance, as well as a role in a causal chain. Furthermore, stories are selective towards events with regard to their relevance to the plot.

1.3 Historical Narration

Historical narratives are, according to Ricoeur, part of a particular kind of narrative. History differs from fiction in its aim to describe reality as it really happened. That is, in its claim to truth. Ricoeur describes that this crucial difference explicitly shows itself in history’s constant appeal to what he calls *the trace*. He writes: *“If we can speak of observation in history, it is because the trace is to historical knowledge what direct or instrumental observation is to the natural sciences.”* (Ricoeur 2004, 170). The trace is thus what is meant by the observable remnants of the past – testimonies, archives, writings, archaeological finds and so on – which allow history to be verified, corrected, and invalidated. It is with reference to the trace that two different histories can be compared, and that it can be assessed whether one history is more accurate than the other (Dowling 2011, 74). However, history’s ability to accurately describe the past does not solely depend on its drawing correctly and extensively from the trace. Ricoeur explains that both *prefiguration* and *configuration* are present in the writing and understanding of history. History, therefore, carries in it a narrative element. In the past section, it was explained that the meaning and function of events is largely determined through prefiguration and configuration. Since correct portrayal of meaning and function of events is of great importance in history’s aim to accurately describe the past, narrativity is an important factor in the practice of history writing and should be considered as such.

1.4 Prefiguration and the Historical Narrative

Ricoeur claims that history is subject to prefiguration due to it being rooted in human action. Historical events – revolutions, conflicts, inventions, journeys – are all partly governed by human volition and are hence understood in terms of goal, motive, and intention. This is what makes history different from say, geology, which studies the history of the earth, or evolutionary biology, which studies the evolutionary history of biological species.⁶ The properties that make

i.e., has a long time of narration – is probably of importance to the plot. (Dowling 2011, 53)

5 When people do spend a large proportion of time telling about an unimportant detail, they often warn the listener beforehand to prevent confusion. For instance, by explicitly saying that what comes next is an extraneous detail, or by apologizing beforehand for ‘going off topic’.

6 Interestingly, some contemporary theories in geology and evolutionary history include the notion of volition. Human actions have a significant impact on the geological processes of the planet, here the notions of narrative and material causality will intertwine more and more. Theories of human evolution also stress the effect of human action on human’s evolutionary course. Human activity is especially important in theories of ecological niche construction (Clark 2006).

human action narrative – motive, volition, goal – cause history, by virtue of it being grounded in human action, to be irreducibly narrative as well; humans understand the actions of historical figures as how they would the actions of their contemporaries. Historical narration, however, is often not about the actions of individuals. It concerns processes that involve abstract collectives like tribes, nations, regions, religions and dominant ideas and worldviews. In Ricoeur’s theory of historical narrative these abstract collectives are treated as actual actors that participate in historical events (Dowling 2011, 70). To illustrate this, Ricoeur takes the example of the Mediterranean in Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, which is described as ‘both site and hero’ performing and suffering from recounted events (Ricoeur 2004, 152:244). Ricoeur describes that ‘the Mediterranean’ should not be taken as the sum of all the individual humans that live on its territories, but as an independent historical actor – a *quasi-character* – whose claim to reality is rooted in the social existence of actual human beings. Since quasi-characters are understood as historical actors, their actions are understood through the process of prefiguration – i.e., in terms of motive, volition, and goal.

National histories often tell the story of the nation as quasi-character. The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is no exception. In the canon, various traits are ascribed to ‘the Netherlands’ that refer to it being something more than a mere geographical region or political entity. For example, the first item of the canon describes the ‘first inhabitants of our country of rivers’.⁷ The description of the Netherlands as ‘a country of rivers’ does not merely refer to its geographical qualities. The canon explicitly links the presence of water in the Netherlands with the qualities of cooperation and trade (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). This link is explained in a separate thread within the canon which is called ‘*Nederland waterland*’. The idea is that the geographical makeup of the Netherlands – i.e., the presence of water – made the Netherlands into a country characterized by cooperation and trade. The phrase *Nederland waterland*, does not primarily refer to the actual presence of water. Rather, it refers to the qualities the Netherlands acquired because of the presence of water.⁸ Dutch Historian Maria Grever also describes the notion of the ‘Dutch battle against water’ as feeding into the narrative template of the Netherlands as ‘a small country bravely defending its freedoms’ (Grever 2020). Similar to the development of the Netherlands as a country of cooperation and trade, the development of the Netherlands as a country of ‘knowledge, science, and innovation’ is captured in a separate thread within the canon. Its beginning is marked at the building of the dolmens or *hunebedden* 3300 BCE, and its continuous development is followed through intellectual, cultural, and technological achievements in the eras that followed (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). Thereby, these achievements are connected by a kind of ‘Dutch ingenuity’ that is ascribed to the Netherlands as quasi-character.

For Ricoeur, the treatment of an abstract entity as a quasi-character in history is only justified if this entity existed in the social reality of the historical period that is being discussed. In these cases, Ricoeur even considers it necessary to treat abstract entities as independent historical characters because it allows for a better understanding of historical events. After all, the Netherlands as an abstract entity was really occupied by Germany in the 1940’s and was universally understood to have been so at the time (Dowling 2011, 73). However, describing the first inhabitants of the geographical region of what is now called the Netherlands as inhabitants of ‘our land of water’ does not seem justified. Surely, *Nederland waterland* did not exist in the social reality of the Neolithic. Hence, the existence of the Netherlands as a quasi-character with the ascribed characteristics of cooperation and trade is unjustly projected to the period of 5500 BCE. Similarly, the beginning of the development of the quasi-character of the Netherlands as a country of knowledge and science is unjustly marked at 3300 BCE. In both these cases, the

7 Translated from Dutch. The original text was ‘De eerste bewoners van ons rivierenland’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020).

8 The *poldermodel*, which describes the Dutch consensus model, is arguably the most famous example of this.

abstract entity of the Netherlands as a land of cooperation, trade, knowledge, and innovation did not yet exist in the social reality in the greater portion of the period that is being discussed. However, for readers of the Dutch canon, The Netherlands is not a mere site on which historical events are mapped. From the first item of the canon onwards, The Netherlands performs actions; it fosters a climate of cooperation, it becomes a trading nation, it develops the ingenuity through which it can become a nation of knowledge and science. The development of the Netherlands as quasi-character functions as a plot that influences the way in which historical events are understood through *configuration*.

1.5 Configuration and the Historical Narrative

In the telling of history a multitude of events and actions are gathered into a unified and complete whole; the events that make up the historical narrative are configured into events that contribute to the progress of the overarching narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end (Ricoeur 1991, 21). Consequently, the properties of emplotment are also present in historical narration. One event happens *because of* another, the events have specific *functions* in relation to the plot, and the events are more or less *important* with respect to the plot. For example, in the story of the French Revolution poor harvests are seen as one of the primary *causes* of the revolution. Consequently, agriculture obtains a political *function* in the overarching narrative that is of significant *importance*. Interestingly, the poor harvests in France are both caused by a long period of heavy storms that were connected to the eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland in 1783 and by outdated agricultural methods and bad policy (Weber 2021; Neale 2010). Here the forward movement that is conferred to events in a plot, the selectivity caused by the plot as well as the difference between material and narrative causality become apparent. Ricoeur stresses that it is part of the historian's job to make a proper selection of relevant events. The historian is in this sense similar to the fiction writer; she has to decide which events have to be told for the overarching narrative to be intelligible (Dowling 2011, 64). However, it is in the process of selection that the difference between history and fiction become apparent as well. For, to decide and justify the relevance of selected events, extensive use of the trace is needed. The case of the Laki volcano shows that this selection can never be exhaustive. There will always be causative factors that will be omitted from the historical narrative. Also, it shows the importance, ever stressed by Ricoeur, of discriminating between material and narrative causality. The causal relation between Laki's eruption and the poor harvests, and the causal relation between bad policy and outdated agricultural methods and poor harvests are different in kind. Hence, they must be treated separately.⁹

Emplotment is clearly present in the canon of the Netherlands. Going back to the examples of *Nederland waterland* and the Netherlands as a country of knowledge, science, and innovation, it can be seen that historical events in the canon acquire their meaning in light of these two threads. The first inhabitants of the geographical region that is now called the Netherlands are already described as adjusting their lifestyles to all the water that is present in the Netherlands, and this is then linked to the trait of cooperation and trade. Similarly, the ingenuity of the peoples building the dolmens is marked as the birth of the trait of ingenuity typical of the Netherlands. The forward motion of emplotment is visible here. Implying a set of traits, typical for

⁹ These different forms of causality also have different implications with regards to responsibility. Bad agricultural policy is part of the chain of narrative causality. Narrative causality implies a notion of responsibility and hence accountability. Since volition and motivation are involved, someone can be taken responsible for the bad harvests leading up to the discontent that sparked the French Revolution. However, the Laki volcano eruption, being a material cause, is no one's responsibility. Looking at climate change, and human's influence on natural phenomena it will be interesting to see whether material causality will move to the realm of responsibility and accountability in the future.

the Netherlands, to have existed for 7000 years. Events that are included in these threads gain a function and meaning relative to the threads. For example, the dolmens, Erasmus, Spinoza and the Beemster thereby acquire the function of being examples of Dutch ingenuity.

In this paragraph it has been shown how the Ricoeurian concepts of *prefiguration*, *configuration*, and *quasi-character* can be applied to the Canon of the Netherlands. In the next chapters, it will be analysed what this implies for the canon, the criticisms raised to the canon, and the revised edition of the canon.

2. The Canon of the Netherlands

The Canon of the Netherlands was first released in 2006. As mentioned before, the direct reason for its formulation was a report that was published by the Dutch Board of Education which concluded that knowledge of Dutch history and culture has severely declined in the Dutch population (Grever et al. 2006, 107). The composition of a national canon was proposed as a solution to this problem and hence a committee consisting of 8 individuals of varied historical expertise was given the task to compile ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 100). The Netherlands is not the only country in which an increased emphasis on the nation in history curricula is currently being argued for. Recently, England, Spain, the United States, and Canada have seen similar tendencies in which a decline of knowledge concerning national history is given as a reason to change history education. (Létourneau 2017). It was already mentioned that national histories are often as old as nations themselves (Berger 2017). However, it is argued that the current pleas for an emphasis on the nation in history education are caused by recent phenomena. The rise of individual identities, the increase of international migrations, and the growing globalism of younger generations are named as important factors (Létourneau 2017; de Mul 2011). Not all aforementioned countries have opted for a canon. Nonetheless, the alternatives are quite similar to the Canon of the Netherlands, in that they are chronologically ordered narratives that take the nation as their focal point.¹⁰

2.1 The Canon and its Critics

After its release, ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’ has received mixed reactions. In general, the positive reactions rely on the idea of the nation as a reality rooted in space and time, encompassing central and valuable elements that must be cherished (Létourneau 2017). In this view, historical narration is seen as a means to teach and preserve these elements.¹¹ This idea is also reflected in the main aim of the Dutch canon, which is to formulate the ‘valuable parts of our culture and history that we want to pass on to new generations through education’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006). The negative reactions generally rely on a conception of the nation as a non-static and plural entity that is always in the process of self-actualization (Létourneau 2017). Here, it is questioned whether nations even have central elements. Also, if there are elements that can be identified as central to a nation, these elements are seen as fleeting and constantly subject to change. A national canon does not suit this view, since it tries to identify, capture, and preserve the nation’s central elements. In the paragraphs that follow, I will briefly list the main criticisms that were given to the canon.

The reason that was given for the necessity of a national canon was an alleged knowledge deficit concerning Dutch history and culture. This knowledge deficit is questioned due

¹⁰ For an overview of the alternatives that have been proposed in other countries see: Létourneau 2017.

¹¹ The pleas for more nationally centred history education in other countries – England, Spain, the United States, and Canada – also rely on this notion of the nation. Furthermore, history education is also argued to have as its aim the preservation of the nation’s central elements (Létourneau 2017).

to its lack of empirical evidence (Grever 2006). Also, the idea that a national canon is the best solution to the alleged knowledge deficit is said to not be sufficiently justified. Several Dutch historians have argued that the old curriculum already includes plenty national items, which, provided that they are properly learned, would give sufficient knowledge of national history. According to them, the improvement of historical education by investing in the education of history teachers that are both skilled historians and competent instructors, and the reintroduction of history as a compulsory subject, would have greater effect on students' knowledge of national history than the introduction of the national canon (Grever, Stuurman, et al. 2006; Nieuwenhuys, Paepe, and Grever 2019; Stuurman 2006a).

As for the actual canon, the criticism targets both the national perspective that functions as a thread holding all the individual items together, and the items themselves. National history writing is not a prevalent part of the academic discipline of history today. Claiming that history education should also teach students about history as an academic discipline, it is argued that national history should not be the focus of history education either. As an alternative to the national framework, many historians stress the importance of global and comparative history (Stuurman 2006a; Létourneau 2017; Grever 2020). Education in global and comparative history does not necessarily imply a rejection of the teaching of national history. A specific national event – such as a revolution – can be compared to similar events that occurred at the same time in other countries or to similar events that occurred in different historical times. Furthermore, national events can be seen in the light of global developments occurring at that specific time. It is even argued that by contextualizing the national event in this way, greater knowledge of the event is gained (Stuurman 2006a).

Another argument for the importance of global and comparative history stresses their relevance to student's daily lives. Most students live in a highly globalized world, constantly experiencing phenomena that are influenced by factors from all around the globe. Comparative and global history would make the students better equipped to make sense of their experiences (Stuurman 2006a; de Mul 2011).

Finally, the individual items that make up the canon are criticized mainly for their one-sidedness. For instance, it is claimed that there is an overemphasis on political history in the canon. Also, the stark imbalance between female and male historical figures is criticized, and it is argued that the canon draws an overly positive picture of the Netherlands by not paying enough attention to the dark pages of Dutch history (Rusman 2018; Jonker 2006; Rijpma 2020; van der Heijden 2012).¹²

2.2 The Canon Revised

In the summer of 2019, the minister of Education decided that the canon was in need of revision. The aim of this revision was to 'assess the choices that were made by the first canon committee', to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of 'stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society', and to pay more attention to the 'dark pages of Dutch history' (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020, 17:24). The revision consisted of the substitution of 10 of the 50 items, and a rewriting of the texts accompanying all the items (Funnekotter 2020). Furthermore, it was decided that a recalibration of the contents of the canon is to take place every ten years.

The aim of this paper is to assess whether the revised canon is a good solution to the main criticisms of the first version of the canon. From the criticisms mentioned in the previous chapter, four main strands of criticism can be distilled. Firstly, the claim that the canon would

¹² These criticisms cannot be seen as separate; a narrative that is mainly focused on political history is likely to consist of more male than female historical figures, also, it will repel perspectives of groups that have existed in the political margins, which in turn might lead to a shallow treatment of the 'dark pages' of Dutch history.

improve Dutch national history education was rejected. Rather than changing the contents of the history curriculum it was argued that an investment in the education of history teachers, and the reintroduction of history as a compulsory subject would be more effective (Grever, Jonker, et al. 2006; Stuurman 2006a; Nieuwenhuys, Paepe, and Grever 2019). Secondly, it was argued that global and comparative history are closer to history as an academic discipline and that this should be reflected in history education. Thirdly, it was argued that global and comparative history are better suited to teach students about national historical events by putting them in a broader context. Furthermore, these types of history were argued to better fit the life worlds of students and to provide students with (Stuurman 2006a). Lastly, it was argued that the items of the canon are too one-sided and that the items draw up an overly positive view of Dutch history (Rusman 2018; Jonker 2006; Rijpma 2020; van der Heijden 2012).

Clearly, no revision of the canon will render a solution to the first criticism, after all, this criticism rejects the idea of the canon altogether. Also, comparative, and global history are not considered in the revised canon. National events are not compared to similar events occurring in different places and times, and they are not put in a global context. Hence the second criticism is not met either. However, the revised canon can in a way be seen as a solution to the other criticisms. One formal requirement for the revision was to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of ‘stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society’ (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020, 17:24). This requirement was met through the inclusion of the windows ‘Maria van Bourgondië’, ‘Sara Burgerhart’, ‘Anton de Kom’, ‘Marga Klompé’, and ‘Gastarbeiders’. Hence, the new canon is more plural in that it includes a larger array of historical figures. Also, the revised canon pays more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ in the windows ‘VOC en WIC’, ‘Slavernij’, and ‘Indonesië’.

Furthermore, the decision was made to recalibrate the canon every ten years. This is seen as promising since periodic recalibrations could cause the array of historical figures and events to be broadened in the future (Trouw Redactie 2020; NRC Redactie 2020). Also, taking into account that criticism of the canon often relies on a non-static idea of the nation, regular recalibration could be seen as a means to unite the idea of a non-static nation with a national canon. However, many critics have not been satisfied. The common reaction to the revision is: ‘Yes, the new canon includes more perspectives than the first version, but still, more perspectives are needed.’ (Rijpma 2020). In short, despite the revisions, it is still argued that the plurality of the Dutch past is not sufficiently portrayed in the canon. Now it can be queried what kind of canon would portray the plurality of the past in a sufficient way. What kind of revision would be enough to soothe the criticisms? How many items of the canon should be revised? How much attention should be paid to the ‘dark chapters of Dutch history’ to do justice to it? In the next chapter, Ricoeur’s narrative theory will be used in an attempt to answer these questions.

3. Ricoeur and the Canon

In Ricoeur’s view, rival claims about historical truth are not asserted by producing new historical facts or by supplementing existing narratives with untold or overshadowed historical events, rather, these events have to be invoked ‘to tell an alternative story about the past’ (Dowling 2011, 74). Taking Ricoeur’s narrative theory, this claim can be further elucidated and applied to ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’. In the first chapter, it has been explained that the Netherlands is taken as a quasi-character in the canon, whose actions are understood through the process of prefiguration. Also, it has been described that the events making up the canon are configured into the national plot, which confers meaning, function, and a level of importance to these events. All these narrative elements influence the manner in which historical events are understood, and hence the degree to which history can accurately describe the past. Therefore, the narrative element of history should be taken into account when evaluating to what extent the canon is – or can become – a representation of the ‘plurality of the Dutch past’.

3.1 Narrativity and the Canon

The process of prefiguration can have a significant impact on student's understanding of the historical events included in the canon. The canon spans 7500 years, the Dutch nation however, is 400 years old. As mentioned in the first chapter, Ricoeur argues that an abstract entity should only be treated as a quasi-character in history when this entity existed in the social reality of the historical period that is being discussed. In the Dutch canon, the treatment of the Netherlands as a quasi-character is hence only justified for quite a small fraction of the total time period that is encompassed. From this it follows that the Dutch canon constructs a quasi-character that – for a large part of the canon – has no historical reality. Still, due to the process of prefiguration, students will likely connect events pertaining to 'the Netherlands' – as a quasi-character – throughout the canon. Similarly, it was explained that the process of emplotment causes events to acquire specific meanings and functions with regard to the overarching narrative, also it was explained that events gain a forward movement towards the narrative's end by means of causality rather than succession. The example of the dolmens shows that the historical event 'the building of the dolmens' acquires a specific meaning in the plot that describes the development of the Netherlands as a country of knowledge, science, and innovation. Namely, it describes the first example of ingenuity in Dutch history, that leads up to many more intellectual and technological achievements. Taking the long timespan of the canon, it can thus be criticized that the meaning, function, and causal implications of events that took place thousands of years before anything akin to 'the Netherlands' – apart from it being a geographical region – existed, are nonetheless influenced by the Dutch narrative.

Emplotment of events in the Dutch narrative does not only pose problems to events occurring in the distant past, but configuration also confers meaning, function, and a degree of importance throughout the canon. All events in the canon are hence configured into the Dutch plot, granting them meanings, functions, and a degree of importance relative to *the Netherlands*. Thereby, the global meaning, function, and importance of these events are diminished at best, and dismissed at worst.

In the previous chapter it has been mentioned that, albeit the revisions made to the canon, criticisms concerning its one-sidedness are still not soothed. I think the root of these criticisms, which plead for a canon that better portrays the plurality of the past and that pays more attention to the dark side of history, is to be found in its narrative dimension.

3.2 The Plurality of the Dutch Past

It has already been explained that prefiguration poses a problem to the timespan of the canon, in which the Netherlands is for a large part unjustly posited as a quasi-character. In addition to this, prefiguration poses another problem. The interpretation of events and actions in narratives is influenced by our temporal and cultural situatedness, which form implicit *models of sense-making* (Meretoja 2014). Ricoeur mentions that: 'The reader is pointed toward the sort of figure that likens the narrated events to a narrative form that our culture has made us familiar with.' (Ricoeur 1988, 153). One component that is argued to be prevalent in western *models of sense-making* is the idea of coherence or unity (Maan 2015). Indeed, characters in stories are often expected to behave in a coherent or consistent manner. Characters can of course act in ways that do not conform to this expected coherence, but these actions will then be interpreted *as deviations* (Maan 2015). This is problematic when the Netherlands is taken as a historical-quasi character, since events seem more complicated if they are interpreted as deviations from an expected pattern. In the presence of an expected pattern, additional explanation as to why the Netherlands deviated from this pattern is needed. In the example of the Netherlands as a nation that is good at cooperation and trade, this would mean that the historical periods in which the Netherlands is not being cooperative - or big in trade or science - need additional explanation. Furthermore, historical figures that do not possess the qualities of trade, cooperation, and inge-

nuit, run the risk of being interpreted as atypical, eccentric, or strange – i.e., as deviating from the Dutch pattern. In the case of the canon, the pattern consists of the characteristics ascribed to the Netherlands as quasi-character. Thereby it describes central or core elements of the Netherlands which, as mentioned earlier, are rejected by the critics of the canon. Hence, it makes sense that even after the revision, the criticism of the canon being too one-sided is still being raised. However, the solution that is being proposed, namely the making of periodic revisions in which items in the canon are replaced, will most likely not be sufficient, since these kinds of revisions leave the core elements in place. In other words, periodic revisions falsely imply a non-static idea of the nation, and hence will likely not soothe the critics that plea for an accurate description of the plurality of the Dutch past.

3.3 The Dark Pages of Dutch History

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the revised canon pays more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ through the inclusion of the items ‘VOC en WIC’, ‘Slavernij’, and ‘Indonesië’. This was done as an answer to the claim that the canon draws an overly positive picture of Dutch history. However, Ricoeur describes that rival claims about history are not asserted by supplementing existing narratives with untold or overshadowed historical events. According to Ricoeur, these events have to be invoked ‘to tell an alternative story about the past’ (Dowling 2011, 74). In the canon, the qualities of the Netherlands as quasi-character – trade, knowledge, cooperation – are described as having both positive and negative consequences. It is stressed that the Netherlands due to it being technologically advanced and due to it being a nation of trade carried out violent and unjust actions. Through the inclusion of the items ‘VOC en WIC’, and ‘Slavernij’, more attention is being paid to these negative consequences. However, it seems that the main problem is not that these traits were framed as positive before the revision of the canon. The problem is that these traits are posited as the main and consistent traits of the Netherlands, that have developed for thousands of years. Stressing the negative consequences of these traits or adding historical events that seem at odds with these traits will not change this. The negative consequences of the typical Dutch characteristic of trade, for example, can be stressed by teaching about slavery, the VOC, and the WIC. However, due to them being emplotted in the narrative of the Netherlands as nation of cooperation and trade they will be just that: negative consequences.

Interestingly, there is a recent example in which overshadowed historical events are used to tell an alternative story about the Dutch past. In the book ‘Roofstaat’ – burglary state – episodes of Dutch colonial history are described with the aim of showing that violence, and the unjust treatment of other peoples are essential characteristics – *wezenskenmerken* – of the Dutch past (Bossema 2016). It aims to reveal the pattern of violence and burglary underlying the period of Dutch history from the 13th century until the present (Vanvugt 2016).¹³ Here, the characteristics of violence and burglary are ascribed to the Netherlands. Similar to the historical events described in the canon, the events in *Roofstaat* are configured into a Dutch plot. Contrary to the canon, *Roofstaat* has violence as its main element, rather than as a negative consequence, thus it could be seen as a more genuine depiction of the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’.

However, alternative nationally centred narratives, such as *Roofstaat*, can be criticized with the same arguments that were used to criticize the canon - the Netherlands is treated as a *quasi-character* over a longer timespan than is justified, expected *coherency complicates* historical events, violence and burglary are described *as main elements* of the Netherlands, and historical events are *configured* into a Dutch narrative – hardly rendering them a solution. It seems as if the challenge is to do justice to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ without running the risk of ascribing that ‘darkness’ as a central element of the Netherlands.

13 *Roofstaat* is similar to the Canon of the Netherlands in its claim to be necessary reading material for ‘every Dutch person’ (Vanvugt 2016). Hence, *Roofstaat* wants to tell ‘the Dutch story’ as well.

3.4 How to tell the past in the future?

It is clear that the revised Canon of the Netherlands is no sufficient solution to the main criticisms of the previous version. Although the revised canon has become more pluralistic and spends more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ it has been explained that the narrative elements present in the canon cause the criticisms concerning these matters to persist. Furthermore, the narrative elements present in the canon – the Netherlands as quasi-character with core characteristics, prefiguration, and configuration – pose serious problems to the ambition of the Dutch state to formulate a canon that can represent the plurality of the Dutch past through a continuous process of recalibration. Even if the Dutch canon would include a rich multitude of perspectives, these perspectives will be configured into a plot that will then influence its meaning, function, and degree of importance in relation to the Dutch narrative. Through the example of *Roofstaat*, it was shown that alternative narratives run the risk of falling into the same pitfalls as the canon. This is due to them ascribing to the idea of the nation as a reality that has central characteristics – i.e., trade and cooperation or burglary and violence. Since criticism of the canon generally departs from a rejection of this conception of the nation it can be argued the only national history that would soothe the criticisms will be one that doesn’t propose any central national elements – be them negative, or positive.

4. Conclusion

This paper departed from Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory. It has been discussed how narrative is inherent to the interpretation of human action through *prefiguration*. Also, it has been explained that actions and events in stories are configured to have a specific meaning and function with regard to the overarching narrative in the process of *emplotment*. Historical narratives are particular kinds of narratives and differ from fiction in their aim to describe the past as it really happened. The extent to which a historical narrative fulfils this aim is both dependent on its extensive and accurate reference to the *trace*, and on the narrative elements of prefiguration and configuration. Applying Ricoeur’s theory of narrative to the Canon of the Netherlands it has been shown that a periodic recalibration of the items in the canon will not render a solution to its main criticisms. In the canon, the Netherlands is described as a quasi-character with various central characteristics. The development of the Netherlands, as having these characteristics is followed throughout the canon, and hence the idea of the nation as having central elements that persist through time is endorsed. The items in the canon are configured into this national plot that influences their meaning, function, and importance. The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’, despite its ambitions, will most probably never be a good representation of the plurality of the Dutch past, since it relies on the idea of a nation with several central elements that need to be preserved. A national history that would do justice to the plurality of the Dutch past and that thereby recognizes the plurality of the present, will have to be one that doesn’t propose any central national elements.

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