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published in

European Journal of Literary Studies
2022

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Hoekstra, E. (2022). BRITTING, THE MAGICIAN - OF TRICKSTERS AND DOPES, AND DECEPTIVE STORYLINES. *European Journal of Literary Studies*, 4(1), 11-33.

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BRITTING, THE MAGICIAN - OF TRICKSTERS AND DOPES, AND DECEPTIVE STORYLINES

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Abstract:

The Frisian writer Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen (1824-1906) wrote a short story entitled "Britting, the magician. A memoir", which is argued to constitute a literary masterpiece. In this story, Van der Meulen presents a seemingly innocent memoir about a stranger, Britting, and his wife, who spend some time in Burgum, Van der Meulen's home town. A second storyline features a very humorous description of catechism conducted by the pastor of the local church. Upon closer inspection, the two storylines reveal a complex interaction, full of biblical allusions, which are used to convey Van der Meulen's deeply cynical world view. In this world view, humanity consists of tricksters and dopes, featuring the church's pastor and Britting the magician as supreme examples of tricksters. The literary analysis presented here is meant to unravel the winding paths of Van der Meulen's incidental genius as a story-teller, revealing the wealth and complexity of the interacting allusions between the two storylines. Van der Meulen's style is very similar to that of Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. The article has an appendix containing an English translation of Van der Meulen's masterpiece.

Keywords: allusion, literary complexity, metaphor, cynicism, Laurence Sterne, 19th century

1. Two storylines with a supernatural apotheosis

Is it decent to laugh at other people's misfortune? Laughter seems to be appropriate from a literary point of view provided that there is no empathy on the part of the reader, provided that the reader is at least indifferent to the victims. In this contribution, I will examine a short story that at first sight just seems to be a comical memoir of an old man, but which, upon closer inspection turns out to be an extremely well-written short story expounding a cynical worldview in which humanity is presented as consisting of tricksters and dopes.

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The short story in question is entitled *Britting, the magician. A memoir* (Frisian: *Britting, de gûchelder. In tobinnenbringen*). A complete translation of this story is found in Appendix 1 to this article. The story was written in Frisian by Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen (1824-1906) towards the end of his life, in the year 1900. It only existed in handwriting in the Provincial Library of Tresoar until it was published in 1974 when it was commemorated that it had been 150 years since Van der Meulen was born.^{ii,iii} The story has two storylines.

- One is about Britting, the magician, and his wife, who are travelling people earning a living by selling fish and by performing magical tricks in inns.
- The other storyline involves catechism in church, and it features Peters and his wife, who provide temporary lodging for Britting and his wife.

In this story, the reader is indifferent to the victims, the people living in Burgum who are tricked by Britting the magician twice. First, Britting robs them of food by illegally fishing in the pools and small lakes in the neighbourhood of Burgum. Secondly, he causes them to suffer, in the pub “The three perches”, from a frog plague. A frog plague is also, incidentally, the second plague which was visited on Egypt in the biblical story of Exodus, to punish the Egyptians for their evildoings.

Twinned to the main storyline about Britting is the second storyline, about Peters and the catechism taking place in the church. Peters is a shoemaker who also shears sheep. Shearing sheep can be a metaphor for robbery. Peters is described as a man, bossed around by his wife. Peters is the type of the hanger-on, the collaborator. He is famous for being able to answer all the questions asked by the church priest when doing catechism in church. The narrator presents us with some samples of catechism, but these are a parody of ordinary catechism, as we will see.

As mentioned, the connection between these two storylines is that Britting and his wife rent lodgings with Peters and his wife Antje. Thus Peters, who figures in the church catechism, functions as a hinge between the two storylines. The main storyline is the story of the frog plague caused by Britting at the end of the story. As a result of it, he must make a nightly escape away from Burgum, the village where he has taken up lodgings with Peters. After all, the story seems innocent enough, being told in a very light, rambling, humorous manner. But why does the frog plague take place? How are we to interpret the occasion of such a supernatural event in what otherwise would appear to be light comedy merely based on parody and exaggeration?

There is also a question of form. Why are there two storylines, which, at first sight, do not appear to have any thematic connection? Is this just the result of the narrator’s

ⁱⁱ Meulen, T.G. van der (1974) “Britting, de gûchelder. In tobinnenbringen.” [Britting, the magician, a memoir] In F. Dam en Y. Poortinga (eds) *In brulloft yn 'e Wâlden en oare wiere ferhalen*. [A wedding in the Wâlden and other true stories] Miedema Pers, Ljouwert. Fryske Akademy nr. 465. Also on the internet: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/meul015inbr01_01/meul015inbr01_01_0004.php

ⁱⁱⁱ The same year, 1974, also saw the publication of a collection of brief essays about Van der Meulen: Dam, F., K. Dykstra, J. Knol en Y. Poortinga (1974) *Wâldman en Wrâldboarger*. [Man from the Wâlden region and citizen of the World] Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen (1824-1906). Miedema Pers, Ljouwert. Fryske Akademy nr. 466.

(who describes himself as an old man) rambling memory? As we will see, the two storylines illuminate each other. Each storyline, taken in itself, makes an inconclusive impression, but taken together, they form a tale in which the narrator presents a critical analysis of 19th century society, in which people let themselves be tricked out of money both in the church and in society at large.

2. Does the narrator provide us with reading instruction?

As mentioned, the two storylines appear to be independent of each other. Nevertheless, it is a common literary structuring device to require the reader to connect the two storylines, to interpret one with the aid of the other. Concretely, the parody of the catechism can be used to shed light on the Britting storyline culminating in the frog plague, and vice versa. The two storylines may be part of a larger and more significant whole than when they are considered in isolation. Although this literary structuring device is perhaps out of fashion nowadays, it is as old as literature.^{iv}

It turns out that these two storylines taken together reveal a lot about the narrator's worldview. The two storylines are somewhat hidden in the story, which is presented as the memoir of an old man reminiscing about the past. The style of writing is meandering, the old man, the storyteller, often side-tracks, but he is aware of this. He makes two remarks about his way of storytelling. He writes, by way of introduction to his memoir containing the two storylines:^v

"I do not bind myself to order or time ..., just as it comes into my head, but in such a way that the piece becomes a piece complete in itself, with a beginning and an end, but I can be straight about the fact that I do not tell a story straight. I easily go off the tracks and take detours, almost like Sterne in his Tristram Shandy, not that I want to imitate that famous man, o no, but because it seems to me that detours may have a virtue all of their own."^{vi}

Like Sterne, Van der Meulen's style of writing is not transparent. It is suggestive and humorous and may require, at least in the tale analysed here, a considerable effort on the part of the reader. This must then be the reason that Frisian literary criticism has felt uneasy about Van der Meulen:

"Literary criticism and history of literature have always been ill at ease with the writer Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen (1824-1906). They can't as easily pin him down as ...

^{iv} It is the most important structuring device of Hebrew narrative throughout the Old Testament, and especially in Genesis, as made clear by Alter in his brilliant book: Alter, R. (1981) *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Basic books, New York.

^v All quotes from Frisian have been translated into English.

^{vi} Van der Meulen translates *Tristram Shandy* into Frisian as *Tristram Skandy*, with a k. This is probably on purpose. *Shandy* may be related in English to the words *sham* and *shame*, and *Skandy* may be related in Frisian to the word *skande* 'shame, scandal'. Furthermore, before a vowel the English consonant sh- often corresponds to sk- in Frisian. So, this Frisian 'translation' of the surname *Shandy* seems to be another little joke of the narrator.

Waling Dykstra. ... Van der Meulen couldn't stick to his storyline." (Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga 1974:5)

"A novel requires that the novelist is in control of his thoughts, works according to a method and knows what he is going to tell. Whoever just follows what comes to his mind, loses sight of proportions. Tsjibbe Geerts van der Meulen could for that reason not come up with an adequate composition. (Van der Veen 1974:46)^{vii}

"The composition of his stories is weak. Clarity and simplicity are the defining characteristics of the short story. These are absent in Van der Meulen's stories. ... It seems to me that Van der Meulen, before he began to write, didn't explicitly ask himself what he wanted to write and which form suited his story best. He just began without worrying where he would end up." (Riemersma 1974:66)^{viii}

It appears that the critics have missed what Van der Meulen attempted to achieve. His reference to Sterne should have made it clear that Van der Meulen was never out to achieve "*clarity and simplicity*". Instead, he liked to make detours and to hide suggestive, offensive interpretations behind a style of writing that was intentionally obscure, in all likelihood because he felt he couldn't otherwise convey what he wanted to say. But if Van der Meulen is successful, the story of Britting should yield its meaning upon closer inspection, although it could also be the case that there is nothing more than meets the eye, nothing more than two obscure storylines. Let us return to these storylines. Our question concerns apotheosis: the punishment of the people of Burgum with a frog plague. To appreciate its meaning, we must first investigate the parody of the catechism.

3. Fishy fishermen: event and metaphor

Central to both storylines is fishing, which is used both as a real event and as a metaphor for the human condition in which humanity consists of fish and fishermen. This is achieved in a number of ways. On a material level, Britting carries a fishing rod and fishing nets among his belongings when he takes up lodging with Peters and his wife Antsje. Now, a fishing net is much more competitive than a fishing rod. A fishing rod will be tolerated by the fishermen in the village, but not nets. When Peters' wife Antsje notices the fishing nets, the narrator says:

"Antsje was kindly requested not to mention the fishing nets to anybody; they would benefit from it. Antsje would find out. Well, Antsje had a conscience like a cheese sieve, she winked as if she wanted to say: I understand."

^{vii} Van der Veen, K. (1974) "Tsjibbe Geerts en de humor." [Tsjibbe Geerts and humour] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 40-48.

^{viii} Riemersma, T. (1974) "De verhalen." [The stories] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 62-68.

Britting collects the fish in a bucket, but this bucket has a lid on it so that its contents remain invisible to the villagers. Britting and his wife peddle out the fish in other villages so that the people from Burgum are not aware of the amount of fish they catch. And they give part of their catch to Peters and Antje to fry, who profit from Britting's deceit. In this way, catching fish is just a material part of the story.

However, the narrator uses references to the gospel to effect a symbolical interpretation of catching fish, but this interpretation is the opposite of the meaning it has in the gospel. The references to the gospel, and to church, are loaded with different content. The gospel is referred to by means of the name Peters. Peters is a name that is almost similar to Peter, the apostle. Peter the apostle was a fisherman, who was approached by Jesus:

"As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Peter and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."" (Mark 1:16-17)

In this context, fishing for men has a positive interpretation. Peter and Jesus fish for men in order to lead them from evil to good, not to dupe them. Is it far-fetched to connect Peters to Peter? No, because the story itself does this for us, more specifically the storyline of the catechism does so. Consider the first example of the catechism that the narrator presents us with:

"My father told me how nice catechism could be, but it had never been nicer according to my father as when the priest asked: "What does Peter teach us in the First Epistle of Peter chapter 3, Peters?""

The narrator goes on to explain that there are two reasons for the nicety of this event, summarised below:

- The mismatch between what is said in 1 Peter 3 and the actual relation between Peters and his wife Antsje.
- The sequence of the three Peters all in one sentence.

The first reason why the narrator's father liked this question is that 1 Peter 3 says that wives should be obedient to their husbands, and both father and priest must have known that with Peters, it was the opposite. Thus, what seems like a pious exercise of catechism to the outsider turns into its opposite, a joke at the expense of Peters, but also one at the expense of the gospel. Indeed, Van der Meulen's story is tongue-in-cheek, full of ambiguity, jokes, and mockery.

The second reason why the narrator's father was highly amused at the question quoted above is because of the sequence *Peter Peter Peters*, all in one sentence. This establishes a firm connection between the Peters of our story and St. Peter. However, the nature of this connection is not identity. We already know by now that Peters is a slob to his wife (the narrator told us so at the beginning of the story) and we know that he hosts Britting, a person of dubious morality who illegally catches fish. The connection between St. Peter and Peters is merely formal since it does not involve the identity of character

and mission. It is left to the reader to interpret the significance of the mismatch between the character and behaviour of Peters and that of St. Peter, between the storyline of catechism and the gospel. St. Peter is an associate of Jesus, who leads people from evil to good. As we will see, Peters is an associate of the reverend Paint in the storyline of catechism. But where does reverend Paint lead people to?

- A first hint comes from the parody of the catechism;
- A second hint comes from the parallels between the storyline of the catechism and the storyline of Britting's dubious doings.

4. The parody of catechism

The church priest, reverend Paint, hits upon the idea to do catechism in church, as part of the service, instead of restricting it to bible class. He does so because Peters is a model pupil knowing all the answers:

"No question could be asked without him giving the correct answer. It makes sense that sir Paint was pleased with this and that he wanted to put the wick, burning in Peters, up as a light unto a wider world as that of bible class, and this was honourable of him. Hence, he proposed that he, from the pulpit, would ask questions of Peters on Sundays in the afternoon prayer and that Peters, standing, would answer them.

When word got out about this, people flooded the church. Even the 'big ones', like we used to call gentry and rich folks, wanted to attend this, whereas normally the morning prayer was sufficient for them."

People flooding to church is reminiscent of a scene in the gospel in which fish flood to the nets of the apostle Peter as a result of the presence of Jesus (Luke 5:1-11, John 21: 1-21). Does this parallel seem far-fetched? No, we already saw that Peters is explicitly linked up to St. Peter, the fish catcher. In addition, the Britting storyline provides a concrete parallel to the people flooding the church: in the parallel event in the storyline of catechism, fish flood the nets of Britting:

"But like this Peters and Antje could afford to give away some potatoes in exchange for some fish, deliciously fried and crispy brown. Yes, these folks could use each other. If they ran out of fish, Britting took out his fishing gear and filled up another bucket of fish. He never returned empty-handed. I once saw him fishing in deep waters, and it was as if he was lying amid a school of fish, and as if the fish were crazy, seeing how eager they were to bite. Britting only had to reel them in."

Thus, the event of fish flooding Britting's nets parallels the event of people flooding to church. The symbolism behind this scene is hard to miss. Britting appears to have supernatural powers, turning him into a godlike figure, a trickster god. Especially the phrase "*as if the fish were crazy*" is telling and parallels not only the people flooding to church for the special service with the catechism, but it also prefigures the end of the

story in which people flock to the inn to attend Britting's magical tricks and to fall victim to a frog plague.

Thus, the two storylines are connected by the parallelism in these three scenes: people flooding to the church (storyline of the catechism), fish flooding to Britting's angling rod, and people flocking to the inn. The phrase "*as if the fish were crazy*" may be legitimately transposed as an implicit comment by the narrator on the people flocking to the church and to the inn. The church and the inn are presented as places where people get hooked, and where they spend their money on empty tricks. If we read the Britting story as a comment on the church service, the reverend Paint himself becomes like a magician, differentiated from Britting only by the means he employs.

Now the Britting storyline is linked to the public catechism taking place in the church. Hence our interpretation of the Britting's storyline may be clarified by our interpretation of the storyline of the catechism with which it is twinned. Let us, therefore, go into the catechism. Is this a normal catechism, intended to school people in the way of the Lord, to teach them virtue? Or is it a parody of all this? The scene in which the name Peter was mentioned three times suggested that a mockery was intended. In fact, this interpretation is reinforced by two more scenes involving catechism, in which other members of the congregation are interrogated by the priest.

"The reverend stood like a Jupiter on the pulpit with the thunderbolts in his hand, nobody could know at whom he would throw them. Everybody had to be on guard. Now he could for example fire away his questions, suddenly, while looking them straight in the eye, for women also were his, to one of the female hearers. 'What did Peter do when Jesus was before the assembly, Gaatske.' Then Gaatske could answer like this: 'He struck the servant, cutting off his ear, reverend.'"

First of all, the priest gets compared to Jupiter, the heathen God, which is hardly a compliment. Secondly, the text describes the way he looks at women in a very peculiar way, suggesting a more than ordinary interest in them, especially knowing that Jupiter was a seducer and raper. Thirdly, the answer given by Gaatske is plainly wrong, because the servant's ear was cut off when Jesus was arrested. What took place when Jesus was before the assembly, was in fact that Peter betrayed Jesus. Now, what does the priest say? He should have said that the answer was wrong. Instead, he says:

"The answer to my question does you credit, Gaatske, it proves that the testament is no mystery to you, as it is for many – I will refrain from mentioning any names – but now I ask you, Sibbeltsje, what happened to the ear that was cut off?"

Then Sibbeltsje could answer like this:

"It was divided among women, reverend, that is why they like to listen if evil gets trumpeted around about other people."

Then the priest could spin this out and say:

"Quite correct, miss Sibbeltsje, your answer is in accordance with the truth and with history, as is borne out every day in society and affirmed by you." By handing out such

nice compliments, the women really started to like catechism in front of everybody, as may be readily perceived."

This catechism is a mockery of catechism. The priest mocks the women while seeming to compliment them. It is clear that the congregation knows nothing about the gospel. Of course, it is humorous and entertaining to read. This humorous scene is used to convey a rather critical worldview of both church and society. The church is personified by the reverend Paint and society by Britting, while Peters, the prototypical collaborator, provides the connection between the two.

Indeed, another round of catechism provides further support for the narrator's humorous presentation of his cynical worldview.

"But the priest also put questions to the lords of creation. The reverend had for example preached about Jonah, how he was promoted from student to candidate in theology. How he had to go out into the world to put his light on a candle, which he was rather set against, how he wanted to make an escape and how a whale brought him to the right place after a voyage of three days and three nights.

"And now I ask you, sir Blomfein, Master of Law, who was also educated in high school, what does this history teach us?"

Then Sir Blomfein of course answered:

"That it is not decent for a student to stay underwater for more than three days and three nights, reverend."

"Excellent", the reverend could say, "Your answer, sir Blomfein, grounded in experience, tells us, that the fishing rod can be entrusted to you for fishing in murky waters."

Where are we, what is happening here? This is not a normal church catechism. Although it is presented as a light comedy, we are actually witnessing how one cheat educates another one. Furthermore, here we have another biblical reference turned upside down. Jonah was an unwilling prophet, but he was not a downright scoundrel like Sir Blomfein and the reverend Paint. In addition, this catechism provides yet another reference to fishes and fishing and by this, it links up the storyline of the catechism to the storyline of Britting and his stealthy fishing. Deceit and mockery are not far away in this story. In fact, it is presented with a lot of humour. One senses that Van der Meulen must have decided not to weep at the world's misery but rather to laugh at it. The examples of cheating are not heartbreaking. Otherwise, we couldn't laugh at all this trickery and mockery. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is injustice, even though the narrator doesn't press this point, indeed, he rather hides it. He avoids seriousness, his message is conveyed through humour and ambiguity. Nevertheless, the story as a whole does not testify to much empathy with the people who are tricked.^{ix}

^{ix} Riemersma (1974:67) draws attention to this lack of empathy in other stories by Van der Meulen, and he adds: *"Van der Meulen puts labels on people and moralises, but he doesn't give insight into people."* It is certainly true that Van der Meulen's chief aim is to entertain by telling humorous stories with a moral. Riemersma, T. (1974) *De verhalen*. [The stories] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 62-68.

5. The trickster's judgment

The fishing metaphor is emphasized not only by the reference to the biblical name Peter, but also by the name Britting. This name consists of two Frisian words: *brit* + *ting*. Now the word *brit*- is almost identical to the past participle of the irregular verb *briede* 'fry': *briede* - *brette* - *bret*. This verb is used in the first sentence of the fragment quoted above.

The connection between Britting and frying (frying is an irregular verb in Frisian: *briede-brette-bret*) is also made in another passage:

"A fire pot in which Mrs Britting did her frying (Frisian: in fjoerpot dêr't frou Britting op siede en briede moast)"

So, the connection between Britting and frying fish is firmly established. The second part of his name is *ting*. The word *ting* is cognate with Old English *thing*, a gathering of the people at which judgments may be pronounced. Thus, it is not too far-fetched to interpret the name of Britting, in the context of this story, as 'the ordeal of the fried fish'. Now, a thing, a gathering of the people to pronounce judgments, had a divine side to it. God, the divine, was standardly associated with law and ordeal (cf. Moses and the ten commandments). Similarly, Peter has an association with the divine, the supernatural, him being an associate of Jesus Christ. However, we already saw how Van der Meulen tends to turn the tables on standard assumptions. Seeing that Britting doesn't save people but robs them of food (fish), the supernatural dimension introduced in this story is not benign, but malicious.

The victims of Britting's secret fishing are the inhabitants of Burgum, but they themselves are not good people either, as the storyline of the catechism makes clear in a very humorous manner. They have the same roguish interpretation of the gospel as the reverend Paint, but, in their defence, it could be said that they are misguided by the church priest. However, that may be, the story by Van der Meulen does not rely on compassion and empathy but rather on intellectual analysis and a sense of comedy. Let us now go on to analyse the figure of Britting. Britting is introduced at the beginning of the story, when he takes up lodging with Peters. He moves in, and the narrator notices what he carries with him:

"In addition, the farm car was loaded with bedclothes, not very handsome, a chest with some assorted bundles of stuff, fishing rods and I forgot what else. But this I remember, that in our eyes the most important was this: bound to one of the chests was a big trumpet, a bit damaged, but still a big real trumpet, and a trumpet held, mainly in my eyes, great significance. I had oftentimes seen at the Burgum fair how much could be bound up with sounding the trumpet."

The most noticeable article is the trumpet, and the narrator is careful to make a distinction between what it means to the onlookers in general ("in our eyes"), and to him personally ("in *my* eyes", with italics on "my"). Given that the narrator has a view of the

trumpet that is different from the others, and given that the trumpet is important when the world will be judged in the book of Revelation, this may be taken to imply that the narrator also has a world view that is different from the ordinary people, whom he apparently views as scoundrels who are easily taken in by Paint the priest (the church) and by Britting the magician (the world).

The short story opens with Britting moving in with Peters. Then the author digresses into the storyline of the catechism, after which the narrator returns to the figure of Britting saying:

*“But now we are far removed from the man with the trumpet. I was afraid this would happen, old men and small children cannot be trusted to walk alone, they wander and sidestep so wildly.
But I come home again, I will talk about Britting again.”*

The narrator refers to Britting as *“the man with the trumpet”*, thus emphasizing his main attribute, the other one being his fishing gear. Britting has come to catch and judge, as if he were a trickster god.

This analysis makes it clear that the narrator is not just foolishly going this way and that way, but that he consciously allows himself to do so, just like Sterne, whom he referred to at the beginning of the story, as we mentioned above. The trumpet is also referred to in the storyline of the catechism. Recall the quote presenting the answer of Sibbeltsje to the priest’s question of what happened to the ear that was cut off:

“It was divided among women, reverend, that is why they like to listen if evil gets trumpeted around about other people.”

The verb *trumpet around* is used, establishing a connection between the storyline of the catechism and the storyline of Britting. More specifically, the trumpet of Britting is linked up with evil, with sin, the sin of slander.

Incidentally, the story is written in Frisian, but the priest speaks Dutch with the members of his congregation whom he interrogates, as Dutch is normally spoken in church. The verb Sibbeltsje uses is *rond toeteren*, and this verb is exclusively used for sounding a trumpet or a horn, though it was very informal and somewhat deprecatory. *Toeter* is a vulgar word for trumpet. Britting uses his trumpet when he is touring villages and doing performances. After such a tour he returns to his lodgings, or, as the text says *“when they had performed their magician’s tricks on the region”*. It is also of interest to mention the pseudonym which Britting uses when he presents himself as a magician during his tour. It is *“Theophilus”*. Theophilus is the name of the person whom Luke addresses in the opening section of the gospel of Luke and in the opening section of the Book of Acts. This, then, is another reference to the gospel, indicating that Van der Meulen deliberately composed this short story in a very conscious way. It is a façade that the narrator pretends to be a rambling old fool sharing a comically told memory from his youth. While it is true that the story is based on early memory, it is also an exposition of the narrator’s

worldview, and the narrator provides us with many hidden instructions to help us to reconstruct that worldview.

After touring the countryside, Britting decides to also “*give the inhabitants of Burgum the opportunity to admire him.*” Unlike as in other villages, he doesn’t want to go out in the street in exotic clothes nor use his trumpet. So, he sends out somebody to advertise for him. The people from Burgum flock to the inn (“The three perches”), and pay an entrance fee to attend. In a similar manner, they had flocked to the church service earlier to attend the entertainment provided by the extraordinary catechism exercised by the reverend Paint.

In the inn Britting performs his usual magic tricks. And then comes the grand finale.

“But the last trick was to be the best of all. Since costs were attached to it, Britting asked permission to ask an additional fee for it. His wife was going to go through the audience with a vase and everybody could give whatever he wanted to, but the best part of the joke would be that whatever people gave, was going to be made alive by Britting.”

The last sentence may be read as a statement about a magical trick about to be performed, but in the context of this story, it may also be read as the announcement of a supernatural event. Another detail is telling. While Mrs Britting is going through the audience with the vase, Britting himself is already packing his gear:

“Mrs Britting went through the audience with the beautiful copper vase, while Britting was packing up his gear.”

Why does Britting pack his gear? Apparently, he knows that he will have to make a fast getaway after his final trick. This is another indication that Britting is aware of the frog plague that will be unleashed on the villagers.

“After a lot of ado and talk Britting lifted the lid from the vase and showed us that it was empty. He supposed, he said, his wife had spirited away the money, or it could be the case that it was already changing into something alive.”

Why is the vase empty? It is possible that the audience didn’t put any money into it. Britting also suggests that his wife may have taken away the money, which is an oblique reference to all the trickery which they have committed earlier. Furthermore, Britting turns money into something alive. This almost seems a parody of the Holy Communion in which bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ.

“He put the lid on the vase again and started blowing the trumpet. After some time, he took the lid off the vase, but the life in it was not fast enough in coming to light. Britting stirred in it with his magic wand and yes – there it came. A fat frog jumped out of the vase

onto the table and from the table onto the floor, and it was followed by twenty-five more. It seemed like a re-enactment of the Egyptian frog plague."

People panic and hurry out of the inn, "*because what is more terrible than treading on frogs?*" Everybody is angry at Britting and his wife, who make a fast escape from the inn, and move out of their lodgings at night.

Britting is a true trickster. He takes people's fish and money and he gives frogs back. The frogs can be symbolically interpreted either as Britting's own magic tricks, but they are also symbolic of the inhabitants of Burgum themselves, puffed up and noisy as they are, and croaking. This scene is humorous enough in itself, but remember we noticed that there were several connections between the Britting storyline and the storyline of the catechism. The storyline of the catechism makes it clear that the people cheated by Britting are persons of dubious morality themselves, not knowing the gospel or the rest of the bible and partaking in a catechism that turns ordinary morality upside down. Thus, the people flocking to the inn become Britting's congregation, and his communion is that he takes their money, and gives them frogs in return. Thus, a judgment is pronounced upon the people of Burgum.

Taken together, the two storylines illuminate each other. Most readers are not aware of how critical the narrator is about church and society, misled as they are by the narrator's rambling tone and the numerous jokes, he cracks at them. They interpret the two storylines in isolation from each other, as is witnessed by the reactions from Frisian critics quoted at the beginning of this article.

6. Concluding remarks

This tale leaves us with a rather critical view of society at the close of the 19th century in the Frisian countryside of The Netherlands. It is as if Britting the magician and the reverend Paint are high priests of a trickster god, and our only consolation is to laugh at the foolishness of the congregation. The cynicism implied in this worldview is tempered by the way in which the story is told. The message is softened by being hidden in the tale. It is presented as a memoir told by a rambling old man, and the clues, so to speak, are mixed with humour and sideways remarks. The reader must read well in order to reconstruct the narrator's outlook on life. Another softening mechanism is speaking hypothetically. For example, the narrator presents the catechism in a hypothetical way, using phrases like "*And the reverend could for example ask questions like ...*". Such a phrasing does not commit him to the position that such questions had actually been asked, or such answers were given. At the same time, we get a glimpse of the narrator's outlook on life, as expressed in this humorous, extremely well-written short story.

In the case of Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen, the narrator may be equated with the author. This is the case with many of the tales told by this author.^x The subversive

^x The author "talks about himself and his experiences in every possible and impossible place in his works" (Poortinga 1974:25). Poortinga goes on to present several examples providing evidence that a tale presented by van der Meulen is grounded in his own experience. Although Van der Meulen didn't publish an

criticism of the church makes some sense, seeing that Van der Meulen may be characterized as a 19th century freethinker, as evidenced by the fact that he secretly had a subscription, together with some friends, to the freethinker journal *De Dageraad* [Dawn].^{xi} This journal was published at the instigation of the freethinker society *De vrije gedachte* [Free thought]. The journal may be loosely characterised as humanist, materialist, and atheist. In his youth, Van der Meulen was deeply influenced by the freethinker book “The ruins”, written by C. F. de Volnay.^{xii} Van der Meulen was known to the village people of Burgum as somebody who often made fun of the faith and the church.^{xiii}

There is also a reason why the author chose to tell his tale and present his worldview in this particular form. It would have been impossible to present this message in any clear way, or he would have provoked a scandal. Perhaps he could have been more direct if he had lived in the anonymity of a town like Amsterdam, but the author lived in a Frisian village where he earned his living, and had his network of customers and acquaintances. Any form of directness would have led to ostracism, but it is also well-known that art which imposes limitations on itself is much more interesting and rewarding than art that imposes no limitations on itself.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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autobiography, his tales taken together provide a view not only of the narrator but also of the author. Poortinga, Y. (1974) Man mei in libben ‘tobinnenbringen’ (De autobiografyske ferhalen). [Man with a lively memory (The autobiographical stories)] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 24-31.

^{xi} Wumkes (1934:210-212), Dykstra (1974:17,20). Wumkes, G. A. (1934) Paden fen Fryslân. [Paths of Frisia] Volume 2. 1800-1934. A. J. Osinga, Boalsert. Dykstra, K. (1974) Yn gearfetting gearstald. [composed of summaries] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 17-23.

^{xii} Dam (1974:7). Dam, F. (1974) Kronyk fan libben en wurk. [Chronicle of life and work] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 7-16.

^{xiii} De Jong (1974:170), who interviewed several very old villagers. They also remember that he was a kind of jester to the high-class people, didn’t like much to be at home (partly because of his wife), often gave to poor people though not being well-to-do himself, was an eccentric fellow and liked old and beautiful things.

De Jong, L. (1974) As Burgumer mank de Burgumers. [As a Burgumer among the Burgumers] In Dam, Dykstra, Knol & Poortinga (eds), 170-181.

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Appendix 1: English translation of *Britting, de gûchelder. In tobinnenbringen.*

Britting, the Magician. A Memoir.

A memory by Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen

*As nature has endowed me with an extraordinarily good memory, I can call to mind so many things and stories from my younger years so vividly as if they took place yesterday. Now that I am close to the grave, I number 76 years, but am still able to handle my pen well, and having time for it, I intend to occasionally confine to writing what I experienced, heard and saw in my county and outside it when I was young. Those living with me, or those close to me, can entertain themselves with it if it is funny, and they can profit from it if the story is in a serious vein. I do not bind myself to order or time, at times I like to tell stories from sixty years ago, and at other times stories that took place recently, just as I fancy it, but in such a way that the piece becomes a piece complete in itself, with a beginning and an end, but I can be straight about the fact that I do not tell a story straight. I easily go off the tracks and take detours, almost like Sterne in his *Tristram Shandy*, not that I want to imitate that famous man, o no, but because it seems to me that detours may have a virtue all of their own.*

My first piece has the title: Britting, the magician.

It must have been, let's see – I am now more or less 76 years of age and we are now in the year 1899 – then it must have been 63 years ago, I was a boy of about twelve years old, then along the Low Road (a string of houses along the road from Burgum to Burgumerdaam) a waggon rode up to us, pulled along by one horse, a carman on the perch, and two strangely dressed persons in it. The farm waggon was loaded with bed clothes, not very handsome, a chest with some assorted bundles of stuff, fishing rods and I forgot what else. But this I remember, that in our eyes the most important was this: bound to one of the chests was a big trumpet, a bit damaged, but still a big real trumpet, and a trumpet held, mainly in my eyes, great significance. I had oftentimes seen at the Burgum fair how much could be bound up with sounding the trumpet. The carman stopped before the house of Peters (not Peter) the shoemaker and Antsje. There they unloaded the waggon and carried their belongings inside the house and the strangely dressed pair took up their lodgings and then the carman drove away again from the place he came from.

Afterwards we got to know that the trumpet man had negotiated accommodation a week in advance with Peters and Antsje for himself and his wife and belongings.

Peters and Antsje lived almost in the middle of the Empty Road, in what was then an old house with a thatched roof. Peters was shoemaker and sheep shearer, Antsje, whenever she wasn't pregnant and could go out if the children permitted, peddles bread, or if it were the time for it, kippers. She could also work with peat. She was a man's hero.

To earn something on the side, they had a baiting place. No to sell liquor but to host salesmen and musicians operating at fairs, who were much more numerous when I was young than nowadays. That kind of people could find a room day and night for a penny or so with Peters and Antsje, food not included of course, and the bed in the attic was of course nothing but straw. If one crept out of it, another slept in on it. When there was a fait in Burgum, the attic was often too small to accommodate old and young, men and women, all by each other.

If Peters was by nature good, Christian and pious like Socrates, Antsje was a Xantippe, raging and cross. It has happened that, when she had been unleashed and had the devil inside, that she disturbed half, yes the whole of the Low Road. "Peters' Antsje is unleashed", people said, and, as if there was a fire, people, unleashed, flocked to it. Alas for whoever was her target. But once I saw she got mangled herself.

At that time there lived a man in Burgum who was called Rienk Englishman. He had received that nickname because he had been taken captive in the time of the French by the English and had been imprisoned there. Later, when Nap. I met with defeat, Rienk was set free and he could return to Friesland.

He did so, but as a married man, for he had found a Mary in England who liked to have him. Since she spoke English and Rienk could get by as well, he got the nickname Englishman. Mary soon learned enough Frisian to save herself from inconvenience, but there was no word which she disliked more than the Frisian word *ik*. She always stuck to I (AI). It sounded funny.

But this English Mary was the target of Antsje one evening. As long as they stuck to words, Antsje was very formidable, the terrible words of Mary we couldn't understand, but all this changed when Mary's blood got so hot that she couldn't refrain from using her hands. The hands, I say, but I should have said, the thumbs. She put her thumbs in her hands and with a "Goddamn, AI shall get you", she flew at Antsje, and, though she grabbed pliers, but oh my, it was to no avail when Mary began to fistfight. Soon Antsje was lying on the floor, her screams "Help, help, she's killing me" resounded along the houses and it could have become true, for English Mary was foaming at the mouth. And by nature, she was such a good person. Our policeman and his assistant had been warned in time and thus Antsje was saved again. But she suffered from it, for many days.

But if Antsje was a shrew, as I said, her husband was meek. Although he suffered because of his wife, no complaint passed his lips. And he had read very much, considering the time he lived in. He was well versed in the Bible. As a young man, of course before I was born, I have heard this from my father, he went to catechism with our Reverend Paint. Sir Paint, one of the founders of the Society for the Common Good of the department of Burgum, was a man ahead of his times. He was a blessing for our village in many respects. But of all taking catechism with the Reverend there was none who had advanced as much as Peters. He knew the answer to almost every question that was put to him. No question could be asked without him giving the correct answer. It makes sense that sir Paint was pleased with this and that he wanted to put the wick, burning in Peters, up as a light unto a wider world as that of bible class, and this was honourable of him. Hence, he proposed that he, from the pulpit, would ask questions of Peters on Sundays in the afternoon prayer and that Peters, standing, would answer them.

When word got out about this, people flooded the church. Even the 'big ones', like we used to call gentry and rich folks, wanted to attend this, whereas otherwise the morning prayer was sufficient for them.

My father told me how nice catechism could be, but it had never been nicer according to my father as when the priest asked: "What does Peter teach us in the First Epistle of Peter chapter 3, Peters?" Father liked the question so much because the three times Peter sounded so special or so sweet. I just want to add, almost like J. A. A. Governor used the word "morning" in his nice comedy: a man is writing at his desk at home. His barber comes to shave him and says "Good morning." The man turns around and says "Good morning." He feels his chin and thinks that shaving is not necessary today and says "Tomorrow morning". The barber is not used to that and asks "Tomorrow morning". The man answers again "Tomorrow morning." The barber leaves and says "Good morning." The man takes up his pen again and mumbles "Good Morning."^{xiv}

But just like that "morning morning" is why the piece is funny, father found the question nice because of the word "Peter Peter", but also for another reason. When Peters, standing, had to say what Peter taught people in the first chapter of the epistle, it amounted to the instruction that married women had to serve and be obedient to their husbands and seeing that Peters stood before his wife as a zero before a one after marrying, or even less, father found church catechism an experience both entertaining and unforgettable.

^{xiv} Both "tomorrow morning" and "good morning" translate into Dutch as the same expression "morgen". Thus, the dialogue consists of seven times the word "morgen". The story of the man and the barber is taken from a Dutch play, and it is told in Dutch. It is not unusual to report Dutch speech in Dutch even though the conversation or story as a whole is in Frisian.

But if I were the Reverend nowadays, I would reintroduce the fashion of connecting with churchgoers by way of questioning. They didn't have to be catechumens. I would like to loosely address this or that male or female hearer by asking an easy question which everybody could answer who was not utterly without brains.

This would keep the audience from falling asleep, sure, take care. The Reverend used to stand like a Jupiter on the pulpit with the thunderbolts in his hand, nobody could know at whom he would throw them. Everybody had to be on guard. Now he could for example fire away his questions, suddenly, while looking them straight in the eye, for women also were his, to one of the female hearers.

'What did Peter do when Jesus was before the assembly, Gaatske.'

Then Gaatske could answer like this:

'He struck the servant, cutting off his ear, Reverend.'

Then the Reverend could answer like this: "The answer to my question does you credit, Gaatske, it proves that the testament is no mystery to you, as it is for many – I will refrain from mentioning any names – but now I ask you, Sibbeltsje, what happened to the ear that was cut off?"

Then Sibbeltsje could answer like this:

"It was divided among women, Reverend, that is why they like to listen if evil gets trumpeted around about other people."

Then the priest could spin this out and say:

"Quite correct, miss Sibbeltsje, your answer is in accordance with the truth and with history, as is borne out every day in society and affirmed by you."

By handing out such nice compliments, the women really started to like catechism in front of everybody, as may be readily perceived.

But the priest also put questions to the lords of creation. The Reverend had for example preached about Jonah, how he was promoted from student to candidate in theology. How he had to go out into the world to put his light on a candle, which he was rather set against, how he wanted to make an escape and how a whale brought him to the right place after a voyage of three days and three nights.

"And now I ask you, sir Blomfein, Master of Law, who was also educated in high school, what does this history teach us?"

Then Sir Blomfein of course answered:

"That it is not decent for a student to stay under water for more than three days and three nights, Reverend."

"Excellent", the Reverend could say, "Your answer, sir Blomfein, grounded in experience, tells us, that the fishing rod can be entrusted to you for fishing in murky waters."

At another service the Reverend preached about Abram's sacrifice. Then he would explain to them how Abram left home in the morning holding hands with his boy Izak, while an ass was carrying the sacrificial tools. If the Reverend wanted to, he could ask for example:

"Master Louw, you are a jack of all trades, I dare to ask you, as you are knowledgeable in all things, what were the tools of the sacrifice?"

"Mm mm," master Louw would say, "I don't know exactly, Reverend, but I venture to say, twelve pieces of dried peat, some kindling-sticks, a bottle of peter oil, a box of matches, a chopping block and a swinging axe."

"A perfect answer," the Reverend would say, "and, as the Bible doesn't contradict it, we can assume that it is true."

Then the Reverend would continue with his sermon until he would get to the mountain where Abraham arrived with his son and his ass for the sacrifice, and he'd tell how Abram took the sacrificial tools from the ass and took them upon himself and his son, leaving the ass in the valley.

And the Reverend could ask: "And why did Abram leave the ass behind in the valley, master Van Houten?"^{xv}

And Van Houten would answer: "To be an example for the voters that it is not right to make asses go out of their depth."

And the Reverend would say: "Exactly so, dear master Van Houten," and elaborate upon that theme.

To be sure, I don't want to involve you, Reverend Sypkens, precious to us all, but if you reintroduced our dear Reverend Paint's habit, then we would see a doubling of the number of folks going to church in the afternoon.

But we have digressed wondrously far away from the man with the trumpet. I had been afraid of this, old folks and young children can often not be trusted to wander unsupervised, so wild is their rambling and wandering.

But I come home again, I take up the topic of Britting again.

Yes, Britting and his wife, or his trull, for such folks often marry in the moonshine, had found lodging for a number of weeks with Peters and Antsje. Of course, they had to arrange their own food and water, fire and light. On mentioning the word water, I must add, however much of a shrew Antsje was, she was as clean as a new pin. Antsje didn't rent out the attic to unclean folk, whom she knew to be riddled with lice and mites, and, if she got wind of it later, they had to move out. And if I say they had to arrange their own food, you see, Antsje told me so herself, singers and magicians staying there during the Burgum fair usually got by with a cold meal. In the morning, they were not particular about a raw or some egg with sugar. Raisin bread thickly buttered. Topped in the stomach with hot milk. During the day they went to stalls for deep fried buns. In the evening a hunk of bread with dry bacon. You see, like that they could make do, isn't that true?

But now they were living with renters for quite some time, now they installed next to the stove on which Antsje cooked, a fire pot in which Mrs Britting did her frying. How did they make a living? Antsje didn't ask, as long as they paid her the rent.

But we soon found out how they made a living. As I mentioned, they arrived late in the autumn. Improvised a place to sleep in the attic and when they were ready, Antsje was not disappointed. The bed sheets were quite handsome, Antsje thought, if they don't have the money, they can give me those. The sheets were as white and clean as those of Antsje. She was quite appeased and friendly with her guests. Britting's fishing rods were safely put up against the back wall of the house, but Antsje was astonished when she saw that one chest, which was opened in the attic, was filled to the brim with fishing nets and. 'It seems that you are fishermen,' said Antsje. Antsje was kindly requested not to mention the fishing nets to anybody; they would benefit from it. Antsje would find out. Well, Antsje had a conscience like a cheese sieve, she winked as if she wanted to say: I understand.

Britting rented a boat from the boat repair man in Burgerdaem, and soon, though it wasn't the right time for it, in the cold dirty month of November, he pushed his boat with his fishing rods out to far-off canals and lakes, which were then more abundant than nowadays, and Britting returned in the afternoon with his tin bucket filled with all kinds of fish, but – that bucket had a lid on it, nobody could see what was in it.

They had fish for more than a week. Mrs. Britting fried them brown and tasty, and Peters and Antsje shared in their luxury, and likewise they shared their Bremen potatoes, very common in those days, and the food of the poor because a basket full of them only cost a penny, with Britting and his wife. It was

^{xv} Van Houten, also the name of a Dutch minister, who extended the right to vote to a larger part of the male population in 1896.

a thick mealy potato and often with a heart in it. Hence, they were also called 'pig potatoes'. There was even a quatrain which the poor recited, full of spite against this potato:

Bremen potatoes fill our mouths and toes. We eat them with mustard sauce every evening in our house.

But like this Peters and Antje could afford to give away some potatoes in return for some fish, deliciously fried and crispy brown. Yes, these folks could use each other. If they ran out of fish, Britting took out his fishing gear and filled up another bucket of fish. He never returned empty handed. I once saw him fishing in deep waters, and it was as if he was lying amid a school of fish, and as if the fish were crazy, seeing how eager they were to bite. Britting only had to reel them in.

It sometimes happened that his wife joined him and then they didn't return by day, then, be sure of it, they had taken along a chest in the boat. Don't ask me where or how they were fishing, but when the boat was safely tied to the shore, and Britting and his wife had found a sleeping place in the hay, in return for a good meal of fish, with a farmer who lived in some far off parts, then Britting and his wife would each go out with a sack or a bucket to peddle out fish. Like this Britting and his wife got food and money. Our fishermen had a strong dislike for this couple, but Britting was able to operate in such a manner that no one could impute anything to him. That winter we had quite changeable weather, almost like the past two winters, but nevertheless the canals had been frozen over for three weeks, though it wasn't strong enough to skate on. Britting would cut holes in the ice and attract the fish, and if he didn't have any luck, they would go out in the countryside. They would each carry stuff for sale and he had the trumpet hanging from a rope on his chest. They would stay away for weeks. They would look for an innkeeper in little or big villages who liked to combine business with pleasure. Once the deal was made, Britting and his wife would dress up in clothes with extremely wild colours and if a good many hearers had heard and given in to the trumpet's clanking, Britting announced that the famous magician Theophilus had arrived, who had performed at the court of the king of Hannover and at other royal courts, who, on his way through to Austria, in the taproom of Harry in the inn "The four pig legs", would present a show consisting of several feats of higher magic. Etc. Beginning at eight o'clock. Entrance fee a quarter. Well, some thirty, forty people would gather together, at other times much more, and wherever the show was mostly a success, they would make a name for themselves and earn quite some money. The other day was the same, in a different village. Like that they earned money, I say, and they kept it, for Britting was not given to strong liquor, certainly not. Man and wife knew how to stick together. Yes, Peters' Antsje didn't have to worry that they wouldn't be able to pay the rent.

Had they finally performed their tricks on a region, then they would move in with Peters and Antsje again and Britting would get his livelihood from the water and the four of them would enjoy it. Apart from the fishermen, they didn't bother anybody. They kept themselves to themselves and the people of Burgum would have remembered them without ill-will or hatred, if they hadn't messed up greatly in the end.

Although in Burgum we knew rather well that Britting was a magician by profession, he hadn't displayed his tricks yet, but when it was the 1st of April and the fairs started off again, Britting deemed it fit to give the inhabitants of Burgum the opportunity to admire him. He came up with a list on which people could sign up and somebody was sent through the village. Here he didn't want to dress up in wildly coloured clothes, sounding his trumpet.

At that time, we had noblemen and other respectable people in the village and they all signed up for the best places at an entrance fee of ten shilling, and for the second-best places at five shilling. The show would take place in the room on the first floor of the inn "The three perches". On a given evening arrived a big group and an excellent group. First class people took the best places, and middle class people and boys, of which I was one, took the other seats.

Britting didn't wear his jester uniform, he was dressed in black and white, like a gentleman, and his wife was the showgirl. They showed that they were equal to them.

Britting opened the soiree with some card tricks, and he did well. Then with instruments. Then when he baked a pancake above a candle in a gentleman's hat, when he put a lock to a boy's mouth, when 'little Janneke', a wooden doll looking like a cone, disappeared while being dressed and later appeared out of the pocket of a married man who couldn't get children, oh, it was all beautiful.

But the last trick was to be the best of all. Since costs were attached to it, Britting asked permission to ask an additional fee for it. His wife was going to go through the audience with a vase and everybody could give whatever he wanted to, but the best part of the joke would be that whatever people gave, was going to be made alive by Britting.

Mrs Britting went through the audience with the beautiful copper vase, while Britting was packing up his gear. Everybody gave, that was the custom. When the gifts had been collected, his wife put the vase on the table and now it was show time. After a lot of ado and talk Britting lifted the lid from the vase and showed us that it was empty. He supposed, he said, his wife had spirited away the money, or it could be the case that it was already changing into something alive. The lid was put on the vase again. He put the lid on the vase again and started blowing the trumpet. After some time, he took the lid off the vase, but the life in it was not fast enough in coming to light. Britting stirred in it with his magic wand and yes – there it came. A fat frog jumped out of the vase onto the table and from the table onto the floor, and it was followed by twenty-five more. It seemed like a re-enactment of the Egyptian frog plague. The first-class ladies sitting in front jumped up and forced their way to the stairs screaming. Others followed them, forcing their way too and that was the reason that in the hubbub those in front fell down and rolled down the stairs and injured themselves, for the gentlemen, indeed all of us, hurried to the stairs. What is more terrible than treading on frogs? They shook their fists at Britting, kicked at his table. The people were boiling mad and the innkeeper as well, for in the commotion people pushed tables upside down. Wine glasses and bottles were shattered, and nobody had paid yet. Everybody tried to get out of the inn and hurry home.

I don't know how Britting and his wife got to their lodgings with Peters and Antsje, but I do know this: at night, somebody ordered for Willem Klaver, our carman in those days. Somebody rented a farm waggon and a horse. In the night, they put their stuff on the waggon and before the sun rose, Britting and his wife had left Burgum. And it was good, their life was in danger here. That was the end of Britting and his wife's stay in Burgum and that is also the end of my story about it.

Burgum, 24 of February 1899.

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