

Great European Novel

Koen Peeters

An extract

Original title Grote Europese Roman
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2009

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Paul Vincent

© Koen Peeters/Paul Vincent/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature—this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

1 Berne

Brussels. The new century had begun and in September in every office the first budget of the new year was being prepared. People devised plans for market expansion, commissioned market research and nonchalantly demolished the last holiday stories. People's minds: ambitious, more and more focused. Business isn't child's play. Theo Marchand closed the door of his office, and very cordially wished his secretary good day. He was off on a three-hour car journey, he told her. She smiled modestly, keeping her distance.

Exactly three hours later Theo reached his destination. A mountain, with the exclusive Hotel des Roses at its summit. Through the front windscreen he saw how the evening sun strewed silver ribbons and tiny mirrors over the surroundings. Nothing disturbed the perfection of the scene. Theo got out of his car and went onto the terrace to watch the unreal landscape. It was something out of a film, a misty print. Romantic clouds were the expression of love, eternity, proofs of God's existence. Theo Marchand was over seventy. Tall, tanned, with prominent masculine lips. Though he was old, he still had the feeling that everyone in his company understood and followed him. Everything was always under control.

He held his hand over his eyes and listened to the wind blowing round the hill. It was ethereally quiet. Yet over there music rose up, like smoke. A message, detached from its source. On Theo's forehead the wrinkles deepened. In his company everything was under control, but for a while there had been industry-wide problems with budgeting, global investment, and oversupply. Suddenly it became clear there wasn't enough work for his people. The business cycle, sir, *the economy, stupid.*

A hunchbacked waiter came and told them obligingly that the mountain was a remnant of a prehistoric dune and that there right in front of them there had once been an ancient sea. Theo felt cornered and went inside. He left his leather overcoat at reception. Under it he wore a black three-piece and red tie with a large knot in it. Yes, the situation was fairly dramatic. Profits were falling everywhere. Nowadays the focus was on noisy, expensive takeovers and too little on integration. The market had changed, but no one could say exactly in what direction or how fast.

The interior of the Hotel des Roses was a dark cradle of comfort and old-fashioned homeliness. On the floor there was wine-red carpet with symmetrical patterns in. A box of cigars was presented at coffee. 'Bal Morale brand,' said the hunchback with a wink. Other fellow-businessmen were already present. Like Theo they had grey hair and wore the right bespoke suits. Everyone was talking, smoking, drinking coffee. They chattered in German, English and French about acquisitions and setting up autonomous companies. These gentlemen were courtiers, commercial agents and they called themselves lads. Entrepreneurs! They met once a year. The club's name was CSP, and all the important market players in Europe were members. CSP was a professional association once set up to negotiate higher discounts, but it also dealt with informal market agreements. For a while CSP stood for 'Cooperative Society for Promotions', and before that 'Chambre Syndicale de la Publicité'. Today the correct meaning no longer mattered. Perhaps they just met for the companionship.

For tonight there was a dinner scheduled. Flaming red letters on a flipchart announced: 'Symposium'. Underneath were six ugly logos. For the next two days there were to be three sessions a day, each separately sponsored. Each day there would be presentation punctuated by advertising slots, of which this was the first: a TV monitor showed images of plastic gadgets, with Christine the hostess standing beside them. Christine was flaxen-haired. On her head perched a ship-shaped hat.

Theo greeted her courteously and his colleagues warmly. This was a reunion of good, old, close friends.

To begin with Albert, whom everyone called Dick.

Then the seriously rich Hubert who drove a gold Mercedes, whose colour was not even ironic.

Then Herman, who was always right, ad nauseam. Screwed up his eyes, pursed his lips smugly and said: 'Didn't I say so?' For Herman had indeed said so, he could never hold his tongue.

Then there was Lenoir who spoke with his mouth fully of fizzing champagne. Spoke French with an English accent and English with a French one. They called him Billennium Man. He had thought up the name for the hooah surrounding the completely unmagical year 2000, which was fortunately now behind us.

Remco. Mr Stress. Everything he touched turned to gold and to publicity, mainly for himself.

Then there was Philippe, who liked to brag about being able to make quick decisions and consequently was proud even of his wrong choices.

Bob, the second eldest. He was seventy, but felt like fifty. Said so incessantly and he did so stroked his youthful, dyed hair. He managed his memory like a warehouse. Everything he had forgotten he deliberately wanted to forget, or so he maintained.

Just then the only woman in the company, Nathalie, arrived. She had a slight squint. According to some people, that was one of the seven beauties, but only one.

Then there were Jean-Paul, Martin and Thomas.

And finally the eldest of them, Theo himself. He thought: this is the very last time they will pay attention to me.

All of them were genuinely happy to see each other again. You could see that from the amiable claps on the shoulder, the hugs and the protracted handshakes. This was CSP, the federation of gift-givers. Over the past decades their family businesses had gone public and had in turn bought up or squeezed dry other public companies. They lived on commission and margins, the steely blue eyes of advertising, the brilliant idea. They brokered, their money liked nervous twitches. CSP people charged by the man hour and invested profits in communication, which pushed up turnover. They made the market fizz, they liberated mankind with their restlessness. *The economy! Stupid!*

Theo joined the company. All of them were talking about software, content and discount. The customer? Nowadays, he compared and then bought without looking. All products had become the same: small and cheap and ordinary. There used to be reputable families, well-known factories, respected houses. Today a brand was just a spark in a garage, some pseudo-Latin creation developed by a branding agency. The world was now full of talk about language technology, navigation, networking and other intangibles. The ladies and gentlemen of CSP were of the old school. In this world people shook hands at length. Physical contact simply confirmed their confidence in each other. Contracts between them scarcely needed putting on paper. The profit they made from each other was never unreasonable and anyone in temporary difficulties let that be known and was able to defer payment.

Theo listened to them. He himself said nothing. Their aggrieved, whining tone irritated him beyond measure. At any moment they would start talking about the stockmarket.

‘At least we’re not ghosts in the financial pages of papers,’ said Martin just then.

‘Do you remember?’ replied Jean-Paul. ‘In March 2000 the Nasdaq index did what it should have long ago. It fell. Slowly at first, then rapidly, and then it imploded. The future was postponed. The lid went back on.’

They raked up recent economic history: the asset-stripping and discarding of language-technology companies. The receivers sawed up their furniture for firewood. Ultimately profit and turnover had become more important than promising dreams. In those days it had become a bloody Roman triumph. The evening had been heavy with the smell of gunpowder. The restructuring of the market created wonderful and righteous fireworks.

Theo listened to it all. A sigh escaped him.

‘May I,’ he asked when he could no longer hold his tongue, ‘may I stay with that image of fireworks for a moment? The day after our gardens really were full of cardboard and plastic, and the summerhouse was gutted. There were firings everywhere as a result. Production lines became shorter. But we find that today’s customer is intelligent again quick, rational. The world is now slim, flat and global: Google, Amazon.com, eBay.’

‘You’re right,’ said Hubert. ‘They need fewer and fewer middle-men or sales staff.’

‘What’s worse is that they no longer need us,’ said Jean-Paul.

The members of CSP should discuss that in depth in the Hotel des Roses. Because Theo was the eldest, he was allowed to cut the cake, which he did rather messily. Raspberry juice spurted over the edge of the dessert plate.

The next morning the company walked from the breakfast room to the meeting venue. God knows why, but it was called the 'Berne Room'. They passed a number of display cases full of gadgets with silk-screen printed logos, punched logos and embroidered logos everywhere. There was even a real apple with a logo on it that had been carved out by the sun's rays. That was called innovation. Brigitte the hostess gave everyone a grey bag that was handy and small, so that scarcely anything fitted into it.

'Thanks for the gift,' said Martin courteously. 'But isn't there a logo on it?'

'Inside,' said Brigitte, 'otherwise you wouldn't use it anyway.' As she said this she stroked his arm momentarily, laughing from beneath a Rubens-style hat covered in flowers.

As excited as children in class they took their seats. At the front a trendologist sketched the market and trends.

Jean-Paul noted on his pad: '- Companies are devouring each other in a shrinking market. Machines are getting smaller, smarter, they are getting too close for comfort. – As for business gifts, we have the wrong and sometimes frankly boring products. – Anyone who gives gifts is open to the charge of corruption.'

These were not the only disturbing findings. A confused discussion ensued and in conclusion a transparency was projected giving their messy conclusions.

First illegibly in mirror image.

Then illegibly upside down.

When the transparency was finally properly positioned, the following appeared on the screen in a trembling spidery hand: 'Yes, something has changed in human interaction. We talk with out knowing each other. We wander, we are searching for something. Do we want to buy or sell? What was it we needed?'

Not exactly brilliant, was the general opinion. So at lunch Lenoir made an impromptu plea for more advertising, as a last-ditch remedy. Vouchers, price-slashing campaigns, volume promotions, sampling – for him that was the only way forward. If the machine cuts out we simply have to administer more oxygen.

Would this restore calm? For a moment it seemed so. Theo saw nodding heads.

'KISS,' said Hubert, 'keep it simple and stupid.'

Dick couldn't see the problem. 'The market will make its own corrections.'

You can buy at any time but you can only sell at the right moment.'

The rest simply said nothing.

After the meal everyone was given a set of advertising brochures by hostess Petra, The participants knew perfectly well that these advertising slots were a stupid ritual, but this had gone on for years. Since the hotel costs were sponsored, the CSP members were forced to endure the advertising. And

it gave stability to their world. The brochures were dutifully leafed through for five minutes and put aside, by the plant tubs. Petra then discreetly disposed of the printed matter. She shook her chestnut curls.

There followed a workshop, in which everyone presented their business figures. In turn they went through their turnover, gross profits and overheads. The information was noted on the board, added up and erased. Only the bottom line appeared on a transparency. This wasn't self-regulation, you couldn't even call it a cartel. But everyone observed what they had known for some time: the figures were falling sharply. The mood dipped again.

After dinner it was the turn of hostess Ilke to distribute her brochures. She wore a red, round hat, and she was a blond Swedish goddess, not the cheap kind. The CSP members leafed dutifully through the brochures. When Ilke had gone, everyone stared into the hearth. Remco threw his catalogue into the flames: sheet after sheet the photos of business associates curled up. For a moment in the burning paperwork Theo glimpsed the photo of a woman showing jewellery. It was as if she were being burnt alive.

The second day of seminars began with an ergonomist, whose theme was the office of the future. 'There will be no more staplers,' he announced with great conviction, 'no paperclips or letter openers, no carbon-copy forms, no glue pots and hence no more conversations with sales reps. From now on the world will be an on-screen world.

Everything on the PC. Search and replace. And *eawkshon*.'

'What does he mean?' asked Lenoir.

E-auction, the ergonomist wrote on the board. And *e-procurement*. Virtual cooperation, defragmentation, outsourcing. 'The market players no longer make time to see you in their office or in a restaurant. You'll be sitting at your desks filling in the quotation requests. *Request for information, request for proposal, request for quotation*. In the future you'll never get out of the building.'

'That's what I said,' nodded Herman.

The ergonomist was talking about society and ethical responsibilities. 'Can you see how the world is changing? Companies return your free samples if they don't order. They hold raffles with your gifts. They go on about deontology.'

Bob raised his elderly, blushing, questioning index finger. 'But perhaps it will last out our time?'

'Yours perhaps,' said the ergonomist, 'but the rest of us will have to wake up.'

'But how?' asked Thomas.

'Focus on core activity and cost-cutting, Packaging know-how. Knowledge management. Profile management.'

'And what if we all find that boring?' ventured Martin.

'So will we never actually meet each other anymore?'

That, everyone agreed, would be terrible.

Their friendship provided a wonderfully moving moment. 'We'd all miss each other so,' said Nathalie, looking at everyone personally as if already taking leave of them. Perhaps she even meant it.

Someone said something in Latin about *amicitia*, after which they rose for lunch.

That afternoon's hostess was called Sigrid. She wore a cute customs officer's uniform and distributed ballpoint pens to the CS members. Sigrid had an important message: 'Your logo will be repeated on an astronomical scale on this ballpoint. You will get a minimum exposure of three million. You'll never be able to achieve that by yourself.'

'No, I can never achieve that by myself,' said Dick.

'But we're selling ballpoints, when no one writes anymore,' said Bob and with an awkward movement knocked over her plastic jar containing hundreds of pens they clattered to the floor, and Remco and Herman started kicking them about involuntarily, and then deliberately. The hostess beat a retreat. 'Don't you want to play pick-up-sticks with us?' Remco called after her cheerfully.

After lunch there was an advertising man scheduled for the Berne Room. He entered in shirtsleeves. He said: 'I can see you thinking: hasn't he got a jacket? Well, let me tell you I have.' He showed them his jacket and then put it aside again.

He talked first about concept, then about basic strategy, then development.

Everything he said was projected in PowerPoint, 'What catches the eye, catches the mind,' he stated and resolutely placed a number of cartons on the table which he kept covered. 'Something fundamental is going on with human beings. A dryness, a dreariness, a soberness. So in future we must package differently.'

His campaign proposal maintained that there were two kinds of people. Those who consider themselves rich, and everyone else.

'What do you mean by rich?' asked Hubert.

'I mean affluence, linked with a certain degree of contentment.'

'Is that all you mean?' sighed Hubert.

'We want to expand that feeling in an advertising campaign. Make it elastic.

Because people are constantly asking themselves what something costs. But was they mostly mean is: is it important, or simply worthless?'

The advertising man showed them a carton sporting a semi-circle with two horizontal bars.

The euro.

'It will be happening soon,' he whispered. 'The euro will mean that people will go on holiday increasingly often. They will feel like tourist in their own country, with foreign money in their pockets. The consumer will scarcely realise whether something is cheap or expensive. Europeans will finally be happy.'

He told them cheerful insignificant things. Perfumed air, emptiness glibness.

'But do you need advertising for that? Won't that euro of yours be there anyway?' asked Thomas.

'Of course. I'm aware of that,' said the advertising man.

'If you're trying to sell us the euro as an advertising project, you're underestimating us,' said Thomas.

'I wouldn't dare. But what we have got to do is point out the pleasure principle to the consumer. The freedom to spend whatever he likes. Appeal to people at the aspirational level, push up consumption. Once again, packaging. I'll show you a few illuminating advertising concepts.'

He unveiled his cartons: tulips in all the colours of the flags of Europe, a woman with a cuddly child by a historic building, fruit stalls on the market, apple tree a realistic image of a boy and girl engaged in a deep French kiss. Also energetic over- 50s always in couples, and also young men and women, around forty, smiling as they sat eating sandwiches at a weathered table in the sunshine.

Nathalie got up agitatedly. She waved her busy red shawl, threw back her hair and said: 'If my shawl were a feather boa and your advertising were syrup we could send you off tarred and feathered. Do you appreciate the meaning of that packaging, I wonder?'

The advertising man didn't understand her.

'She means that there's no business for you here,' shouted Jean-Paul.

'Don't forget to take your cartons with you,' said Thomas.

When the advertising man had gone, they looked at each other. The only thing that had got through to them at all was that last advertising image of sandwich eaters in the sun. Was that them? That brotherhood, that lasting bond that endures come what may? An eternal alliance.

The evening meal consisted of rolls, but the sun did not shine down on them as in the ad. Bob told them at great length about the good old days, and everyone ate. Sudden Theo pushed aside his plate with a half-eaten roll on it and began very rapidly nodding in assent and shaking his head in disagreement. He asked short interim questions to which Bob could only answer yes. Then Bob began eating and Theo took over the leading role in the conversation, with open questions, velvety summaries and active listening. No, they didn't want any more half-baked trendologists, or ergonomists, or advertising men, or economists or sociologists, or psychologists.

'What about a semiotician then?' asked Remco.

'You're semiconscious yourself,' said Bob. 'Joke, Remco. But what *do* we want then?'

'You're asking the right question,' said Theo, and this proved to be their conclusion after the discussion: did they need someone from their own field, who could nevertheless think outside the box, someone who could see the bigger picture?

They needed a mirror, to reflect their own frail souls.

'We're looking for a member of staff,' said Theo, 'who's good at languages.

Who's competent, discreet and tactful. We must give him a research brief to map out the new Europe. But in the right way.'

'Yes, and definitely include Eastern Europe,' said Remco.

'Quite right, Remco. So all we need is a suitable candidate,' said Bob, who had now also finished eating.

'I just happen to have a good candidate,' said Theo.

It went very quiet. Not even any sound from the airconditioning or any coughing. They realised that Theo had known all along what he was after. Deep down they would have liked to be the one to find a solution. But because they were tired, because they didn't know the answer and because time solves all things, and because no one said no, this was called the only good proposal. The agreement was noted.

They would jointly fund this male/female candidate to examine the problem in a large-scale research programme lasting several years.

In the hotel lobby it was time for a final advertising opportunity. There were two stands full of gadgets. All the exhibits had been manufactured in the cheap Far East, whether or not by child labour, and everything testified to well-thought out superfluity. There were sliding windows, town maps, coin boxes and stickers. There were staplers and perforators in fluorescent advertising colours, scarves and letteropeners, and lots of fountain pens and ballpoints. On the stand the familiar dreary words 'Promotion, Products, Price' screamed out. But fortunately the hostess was irresistible. She was completely naked and a hostess suit was painted on her bare flesh. Or perhaps not: she was wearing a tight-fitting catsuit with a very realistic breast painted on it in the colours of a hostess suit.

'I only have eyes for you,' said Thomas to the girl.

'All those p's of promotion and products, it's like porn,' said Leroux.

The girl smiled sweetly. Everyone filed past.

Although there was now a solution insight, dinner began gloomily.

'It all began with those cheap air flights and container traffic,' said Bob.

'And the satellites,' said Bob.

'And e-mail,' said Herman.

'Und so weiter,' said Martin.

'And so on,' said Dick.

'Et cetera,' said Hubert.

'We're rearranging deckchairs on the *Titanic*,' said Natalie.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of that whining they hit the red wine and were soon, with complete conviction, singing the praises of their undying friendship.

Together they sang Gilbert Bécaud's 'Nathalie' and Georges Brassens' 'Les copains d'abord'. Shortly before midnight they went outside for a breath of fresh air.

It was raining gently. The moon was a razor-sharp crescent, the edge of a fingernail.

The euro sign.

Their own campaign for wealth and pleasure had begun.

In the bar at the foot of the mountain they drank too much. When they emerged, unsteadily but inwardly assured, they sang the old song they had just heard in the bar, 'Walk like an Egyptian' by the Bangles. They went back uphill, with the awkward arm and leg movements that went with the song. It began raining harder.

Giggling, stumbling and moving like Egyptians the group reached the Hotel des Roses. Drunk and soaked to the skin they slunk in, past the exhibition, which now revealed itself to them in its naked absurdity. Dick fell down and when he got up, he took a stapler out the cabinet, giggling all the while. He pushed his colleague Lenoir against an exhibition partition and stapled him to it by his sleeve.

Lenoir found it funny and Herman stapled his other sleeve and one trouser leg.

Lenoir was in hysterics. 'I'm the big promotion!' he screamed.

'Perforation, you mean!' cried Remco, clipping a hole in Lenoir's shirt with a perforator, which Lenoir thought was taking the joke too far. 'Look what I've found in the corridor!' cried Philippe.

On a hat stand hung the hostesses' hats. Philippe distributed them, putting Sigrid's grey beret on his own head. Herman paraded around in Brigitte's flowered hat and Nathalie in Petra's curly chestnut wig. When Nathalie also tried to perforate Lenoir's trousers, Lenoir tore himself free of the exhibition partition, which fell over with a crash.

Lenoir asked with a snarl if he could perforate her too.

'That depends on your tool,' said Nathalie, and burst out laughing. Thomas and Hubert were walking around using their staplers as castanets. Thomas, in Ilke's round red hat launched a file into the air like a seagull. He was laughing his head off.

Glasses fell over and shattered and Remco juggled with a letter opener, while a cold wind blew in from the open door. Theo, the only one who was sober, saw the brute violence of the drunken pack, and especially the acute danger of the gleaming letter opener.

‘That’s enough,’ he said. But no one heard him.

‘That’s enough!’ he shouted, far too loud. This time they heard him. In the midst of the vandalised, ridiculous exhibition the men removed their borrowed hats.

Nathalie took off her wig and tidied her clothes. The letter-opener was put back in the exhibition cabinet, third shelf on the left.