

Five contributions to an anthology of optimism.

Acide or pessimism.

To say that man has a lively aptitude for terror and venom is just as banal as to say that water is wet. It is difficult, though, to come to terms with the most banal of things: some completely ignore their own banality, while others are positively captivated by it. The conclusion therefore that, as a human being, we are dangerous animals is a difficult platitude to live with. There were times, long ago, when the political and artistic culture repressed, and even denied, this. That was when politics and culture rejoiced at Progress, New Man and the Hour of Redemption, much like a frog can talk itself into having wings. There are also times – like today – when we cannot see a bird cleave the air without hearing the painful noises that animal will make as a result of our oil slick while it dies a slow death in polluted sands. These days, we are totally enthralled by the insight into our banality of a dangerous animal species. By far the most forms of intelligence and creativity are being applied either to broaden this insight, or to protect us from ourselves. Powerful, brilliantly enthusing and realistic wing strokes that throw open the windows to new vistas have become extremely rare, both in art and in politics. There are no longer any big stories. Truth is an illusion, except for this truth. The idea of a society living together in solidarity is a totalitarian delusion. The invisible hand that regulates the free market turns out to be a mid-finger salute. Hope, faith and love have become the realm of dangerous crackpots, and we prefer to move backwards rather than forwards. Only the warmth of your own crack is safe and secure. Just ask the arse beetle.

Based on this popular belief, government policy statements are written, works of art produced, novels written and theatrical performances staged.

The philosophies of progress, theological aesthetics, faithful optimists have carefully smashed into the 20th century. What is left is a churchyard of historic enthusiasms. The last regiment of believers who still really matter have for the past 50 years been working in the banking sector, where they were able to indulge in speculation and *creatio ex nihilo*, and where *diffusivum sui* Money and God grew bigger of their own accord. Since the financial crisis, though, which has only just started, this last

regiment of believers is now also perishing on account of its own naïve speculative systems. It seems as if we have reached a unique era, one with no project or speculators.

What is so exceptional about this juncture is that the pessimism of the prevalent ideology in art and politics has also infiltrated what used to be its counter movements. Everyone bows to the pessimistic regime. At least the religious culture of progress had a Voltaire to kick against its railings. In the days when a naïve belief in progress, religious teachings, socialist or free-market Utopia prevailed, artists, scientists and philosophers took on the long-suffering role of sceptics for centuries. Critically and subversively, they unmasked the optimistic regimes as emphatic misjudgements of the banal fact that Man is actually a skunk. They were the avant-gardes, the vanguards who set the tone for today's political and cultural regimes. Now, though, everyone sings the same dull, lamentable song. Politics has become a question of putting safeguards in place, while culture has given way to aesthetic laments. To some, only hearing the word avant-garde is enough to get their biles to produce a squirt of acid. While subversiveness, criticism, avant-garde today is exactly that: unmasking our pessimistic regime as being completely in the grip of its own banality. Indeed, water is wet and Man is a skunk. And this is only the start.

My first contribution to our anthology of optimism is a tribute to the patriarch of the enlightened, subversive, critical avant-garde himself: Voltaire.

Exactly 250 years ago, in 1759, Voltaire wrote "Candide ou l'optimisme". He lashed out, no holds barred, at the regime of his day: optimism. In order to have a good long discussion on something, you need to have strong foundations. This is why I have re-written this book. It is now entitled "Acide ou le pessimisme". I have kept it brief, because time is pressing.

Candide is the story of a trusting, pleasant young man who grows up in a fabulous court setting under the best of circumstances. Everything is wonderful in the most wonderful of worlds. His teacher, Pangloss, makes it clear that we actually live in the best possible of all possible worlds. After many escapades during which he is taken, beaten and betrayed, Candide is not well. He travelled around the world, eager to learn and help, and ended up well and truly fleeced, his ideals of progress broken, his trust in smithereens, his love violated, his imagination faded, and his sense of responsibility at an all-time low. The book ends when the once credulous,

enterprising, travel-mad Candide, now bruised, deals a final blow to optimists and explorers, uttering his last sentence: “il faut cultiver son jardin”, we must cultivate our garden.

And now onto “*Acide or pessimism.*”

Acide grows up in a crap town and everything is crap.

His teacher tells him: “Acide, everything is crap in the crappiest of all crap worlds.”

Acide leaves his crap town, doomed by crap circumstances to get to know the rest of the crap world. After many weird and wonderful adventures in which he, for the very first time, becomes acquainted with even more abject poverty, pain and terror of other people in the crappiest world of all crap worlds, he returns home. His imagination whetted, his intelligence sharpened, his sense of responsibility heightened and his sense of enterprise awakened, he has forever lost the luxury of feeling like crap. He wipes his nose, into which he can also insert a buttercup or which can serve as a launch pad for a swallow on a winter break, and utters his last sentence, which is at the same time the starting shot for all the crest-fallen and faint-hearted: il faut cultiver son chemin, we must cultivate our path.

The mechanics of critical optimism.

Not so long ago, I was really down. Nothing seemed to work out. I could no longer pluck up the energy to turn the tide deep down, and my bones had the panache of a leaking drain. I was like that for days, if not weeks – you soon lose any concept of time when you are in this state – until I switched my telephone back on. Not that I expected anything, or something. It really didn't matter either way. There was a message.

I listened to it, and I am still bowled over by it.

Here it is.

(Voicemail:) Hello, this is the automatic answering machine of Pieter De Buysser. I am sorry I am not in at the moment, but if you leave a message, I will return your call.

Beep beep.

“Hi. Hello Pieter. How are things?”

This voice seemed to wait for a response, which, of course, did not happen.

“How are the kids?”

Normally speaking, this is where the answering machine cuts off, but this time, it kept on going.

“I'm glad I've caught you in”

It suddenly started to dawn on me that perhaps I was not listening to an old message but had transferred someone accidentally and so I was talking to someone now.

I said: “Who is this?”

“You”.

Sorry, I'm not interested. I thought I was somehow being roped in one or other telephone advertising campaign for a spiritual ‘Discover Yourself’ campaign.

“No Pieter, listen, it's me, this is your voice, my voice.”

I had to admit that despite the telephone noise, this voice was very much like mine.

“I'd like to chat to you about something.”

I said “Sorry, but this is just a bit odd”.

“Come on, it's me: you.”

“Errm, how do you know that I am you and how do I know that you are me and stuff?”

“I don’t feel like talking about me.”

“I do.”

“You’ve always felt that talking about yourself is a waste of time. I’d like to keep it that way and talk to me, or you in other words, about something that is on your mind quite a bit, or so it seems.”

OK, OK, what does it matter – one me, two me’s, a thousand me’s, no me’s, we’re all listening.

“Well, as you probably know, there are plenty of reasons for being pessimistic, but despite this, given the rather dramatic circumstances, a critical, yet optimistic attitude strikes me as indispensable. What interests me now is to find out what exactly happens inside, how does this intimate mechanical device work so that a critical, optimistic attitude can be sustained?”

Gosh, I wouldn’t call myself an expert in that sort of thing.

“No, but you’re familiar with it, you even make contributions to an anthology of optimism in which you perform on stage the role of the person who is naturally disposed towards critical optimism.”

Yes, I play that role from time to time, and yes, I do believe that people have a certain disposition according to their genes, their environment and their own habits, and that this can differ greatly from one person to the next, certainly, but I don’t think that critical optimism is about differences in disposition of this kind.

“So what is it about then?”

Bizarre mechanical voice of mine, you’re asking me about my intimate mechanical device, but you seem to know a great deal about mechanics, because it is still beyond me how you managed to phone me up. You might be able to answer that question better yourself.

“Not a problem. The intimate mechanical device of the critical optimistic attitude: a DIY kit with instructions in three steps.

Step One: realise that, for starters, people, just like the other animals, are naturally inclined to avoid their own suffering. Even someone who likes to get up to all sorts satisfies a need by doing so, is released, seeks revenge and seeks a brief moment of relief. Even someone who commits suicide does so in order to be released from the pain. Someone who causes himself pain, does so, because, paradoxically, he gets

pleasure out of it, he lets off steam, acts something out. It is better for him or for her to hurt themselves than it isn't. The natural urge to seek what is better is an existential feature. This urge is natural, but is not yet optimism, of course. It is an impulse that we must be able to face. It is the stuff from which the mechanical device of critical optimism is made."

OK, so the stuff from which the mechanical device is made is our natural urge to avoid suffering for ourselves and to seek pleasure. But surely, as this is exactly the source of immeasurable suffering for others, it is anything but optimistic.

"This is true, now all that's left for us to do is to put it together. And we cannot do this on our own, nobody can.

Step two: the putting together can only be done with the realisation that you need someone else. This is the difficult, fragile and risky bit, if you like. Before you know it, you get entangled in post-Christian twaddle about being touched by the other, and if this doesn't happen, the fear to lose your street credibility will tip you into ironic pirouetting, ironic twirls that would be innocent if it wasn't for the fact that they cut right through the ice on which we are moving about carefully on our skates. Without being touched by another, not just because you need him, but because of who he is, you will not manage to put together the mechanical device. Nobody can be critical and optimistic for their own sake, you will simply not get it assembled."

OK, so you put together the mechanical device for someone else's sake, with someone else and for someone else.

And once it's assembled, how do you start?

"Like you would start any other engine: with a spark. An ignition."

A spark is dangerous.

"Extremely dangerous, and things often go wrong in Step 3 too. The spark that ignites the mechanical device is an absurdity, a leap into the unknown, an act of faith. Acts of faith have extremely dangerous ignition mechanisms, but are still needed."

How then do you get a spark that is just right, that only ignites this mechanical device without anything else exploding?

"By realising that there is not a single fundamental reason to believe that it is good to be critical and optimistic, or a single fundamental reason to believe that it is good not to be critical and optimistic, for that matter. It's a decision. Not a belief in something, but a belief full stop, a non-metaphorical belief. A leap, an ignition. A yes. An act of

blind, irrational confirmation, much like when people in love say ‘Yes, I love you’, which is complete nonsense, of course.”

So if I understand you correctly, we have now come full circle: the mechanics of critical optimism are made up of the natural urge to avoid pain and seek pleasure, it is put together with, for and for the sake of someone else, and it stirs into life thanks to the spark of a decision, a leap of faith.

“That’s right. These are the instructions for the DIY kit of critical optimism. Before I go, I just wanted to say that I haven’t just phoned myself up to have a natter with you. I know that I am here with a live audience and that this is a contribution to an anthology of optimism. I called you because I think that insight into the mechanics of critical optimism can help you put it back together if you’ve lost it, or fix it when it’s broken.”

Errm, OK, well, erm, I’ll be off then, I’ll carry on with the show.

“Great, take care and give them my regards”.

He sends his regards.

If only everything in life was that simple.

The ultimate optimistic object.

You may have wondered what this thing is doing here. Well, it's the ultimate optimistic object. User-friendly, environmentally-aware and universally accessible.

What's it made of and what is its purpose?

The thing that catches your eye immediately is this firm batch of brushes. If you want a clean floor, then this is the object of your dreams, but before you get too carried away with this section, let your eye travel to the soft curve, a female rounding, naturally and elegantly polished, a rounding that is nothing but an invitation to caress it and leave the dirty floor for what it is, because usefulness isn't everything in life – even a chicken will agree with you there. There are more spirited things you can do than keeping your floor clean. If you were really living in such an intolerable dung heap that your floor needed cleaning right this very minute, you would have done so a long time ago, wouldn't you, rather than sit here and look at the ultimate optimistic object. You would have just stayed at home and cleaned your floor. So thanks to this elegant rounding, you know that you can leave the brush section for what it is, and launch yourself into space via this soft slope, whether you see it or not, it doesn't really matter, you know that it's not so much the materialness itself of the object that attracts you, but the experience itself of the rounding, the demarcation of space, the experience of a simple basic sculpture. Before you comment that for experiences of this kind, you'd be better off in the world of art, though, let me tell you this. There are so many works of art that are only after this spatial arrangement. Behind this object, though, a small mechanism springs into life – tick-tock tick-tock – and you are enthralled by it. Tick-tock tick-tock. It reminds you that this is not just a work of art that will be sold anyway and will sprinkle speculative money markets until it ends up above the leather sofa of one or other art collector, but that this is very much the ultimate optimistic object which does not simply want you to have a kind of abstract, aesthetic experience. This mechanism that has just sprung into motion makes you face facts. It ticks like a watch and the clockwork, in terms of refinement and precision, is very similar to an exclusive Switch watch, except that it isn't. If you close your eyes, you will hear the soft ticking. If you listen carefully, this is the exact

rhythm of a second, in fact, it's not. This ticking does not indicate time as we know it, divided up in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, centuries, not the ticking of the convention that divides up our time. This is the ticking of the possible time, here. The interval between these two ticks is the moment when Trotsky and Breton, seated in café *Flore* in Paris, after a third coffee, in a moment that never took place, because in those conventional days, they only had two coffees, had a conversation, a flash of insight and mutual understanding, which could have turned the twentieth century completely on its head. Tick-tock tick-tock. This is the moment when an American bank manager, less than a year ago, got into his car, caught a glance of himself in the rear-view mirror before he turned the key and said to himself: Stop it Jamy, stop it, call Bush and Paulson, and tell them you and your bank want to set an example for the nation and propose a general debt cancellation. Collectively, together with the colleagues of the other banks, propose that we leave this metaphysical business for what it is and let the people stay in their houses. Instead, though, he started up the car and an hour later, speculated with one and a half billion that the price of oil would increase, except that it dropped. Tick-tock tick-tock. This is the moment when the President of Congo, probably some 50 years after our conventional time, prepares his speech for the opening of the 5,000th university hospital and school complex, and will for the first time have to admit that there are now enough schools and hospitals, because the people have been living in harmony and good health, and have been developing well for years. Tick-tock tick-tock. This is the moment when the youthful Mao says, "I will tackle this socialism differently and more effectively", but instead, puts on his cap and cleans his teeth. And this, this is now, here, us with the ultimate optimistic object, even before we can comment that an object for hypothetical fantasies is of little use, you start talking yourself. Here I am, me and the ultimate optimistic object and I am speaking. And I say that I know that this is not true, that there is no such thing as an ultimate optimistic object and that this has no meaning. But this forces me to speak, and I am speaking, I am speaking to you here, now, and I am saying through this ultimate optimistic object to you that there is another way. And I say that this doesn't exist unless someone says so. I am talking about another history, another past and another future. A time that unhinges our closed time. And I am saying that – who knows – by saying the words, people might start acting them out, that this may become a custom in towns. People might stop in the street and on squares, let the words of ultimate optimistic object trip off their

tongues and speak directly with other people. This is how an elderly lady on the Brouckere square starts talking about the moment that her husband puts his hand on her forehead and eventually kisses her again, or the unemployed graphic designer who speaks on the corner of Zuidstraat of a time when he will be able to say ‘no’ to the urge of lighting up a joint in the morning, or the member of parliament who talks of the day he decides to persevere, not as a complaint or escape, but just to train the eye, to keep the eye and mouth familiar with the other options. And that this becomes as ordinary as getting two pounds of carrots, that everyone carries on in the time we know and which dictates our rhythm, the time when ultimate optimistic objects will only exist unless you make them, the time that – who knows – will make ultimate optimistic objects superfluous one day.

The most optimistical breakfast ever.

To talk about the other options is easy, of course.

I would like to see another option with my own eyes. Something that's better than what is already there. This is how I went searching, and found a family. I spent with them one morning, recording breakfast.

Father: It's a lovely day again today!

Mother: The birds are singing as usual, and it's as if a herd of frolicking foals are coursing out of my heart.

Daughter: Father, mother, this is again a morning to be thankful to you for the life you have given me. Thank you for this wonderful adventure!

Son-in-law: Father, enchanted and thankful to be calling you father, I appreciate it so much that I am the first to have touched your daughter's slit.

Mother: Indeed fine son-in-law, this is what Edgar is like, he will not touch anyone else's slit. We are still growing towards each other in our love.

Son-in-law: Just like strange cultures grow to each other, play together without eating each other, this is how we all grow towards each other in love.

Father: The money is gone, our house is leaking like a sieve, but we still have a few warm hairs under which we can make a cosy nest.

Mother: I do not kill my children, and when I'm bored, I think of the words of the great Rainer Maria Rilke: if the world around you seems grey and sad, do not blame the world, but blame yourself that you have not had the imagination to make the world a better place.

Father: Today is another day when we can use our imagination. No movie or play for us tonight, or poetry or tragic novels in which the suffering is reforged into a water purifying tablet, because for us, everything is already blossoming. Indeed, we are the blossoms.

Son-in-law: Well said, father, but we're no idiots, we celebrate resistance, for resistance is what we are. After all, the condition of us and our brothers and sisters on this planet is, of course, anything but ideal. Every day, we stage our small revolution, and thus, this morning, I'll start the day with the candle.

Mother: The Candle?

Son-in-law: Absolutely, the candle. This is an eastern tradition. This is yoga.

Mother: Yoga?

Son-in-law: Absolutely, yoga, it may come from a different culture, but it shouldn't frighten you off. You can keep your free expression of opinion, you can do the candle with or without headscarf. The candle is a position with the legs up in the air, so that you start the day with a fresh rush of blood in the brains.

Father: I'll have a go, Son-in-law. I am intrigued and always open to a new experience that promotes our well-being.

Son-in-law: Well, we'll all lie down on our backs then.

(This is what they're doing)

All: How beautiful it is to be a lighthouse. Four lighthouses that do not deny the rocks of every day naively and optimistically, but help to sail round them.

(Legs down again, everyone back to normal)

Daughter: Well, that was totally refreshing! I can now start a fruitful day!

Son-in-law: Today, I'm going to apply myself to a few scientific discoveries. The fact that astronauts have a method for turning their urine into drinking water – now that is inspiring!

Mother: Today, I plan to cut a few Gordian knots in the major moral dilemmas that I face just like everyone else. I know that if I make choices, I also lose out on what I haven't chosen, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Wonderful, I'm already looking forward to my moral refinement!

Father: Today, I am going to train myself further in tender authority. This is good for a father, and I'd like to be a very good father, not out of a need to perform, but simply because it is good to be good, even though I know that what I think is good is not necessarily appreciated by others, let alone that what is good for me and my friends and family would also benefit someone else. Despite this, I can only do what I can, and this is what I'll do. Anything else I'll try to cover with the cloak of charity, and I ask the same of others whom I will thwart in their pleasure, whether they like it or not.

Daughter: How wonderful is the air which you breathe in and out, and we give so little thought to how fantastic this breathing in and out works.

Oh breath that softly rolls in and out of my mouth.

Son-in-law: Oh green rooftops that are always so persistent in their lying down on a slope.

Father: Oh finger even if I have ten. Today, I pay this tribute to you oh finger which is always so faithful and in readiness on my hand.

Mother: Oh

Daughter: Oh

Son-in-law: Oh

The last optimist

My last contribution is the improbable account of the last optimist. It is the most personal contribution, because I very much care about the last optimist, and I am happy to graft my profession as a writer on the contours of his body. It is not entirely clear when the account is set. Traces of this story can be found in the old Persian oral tradition, where it is claimed that the story was originally told by a fish with the head of a vulture and the legs of an antelope. This story was censured throughout the centuries on account of both its revolutionary and counter-revolutionary content. It did get coded in mysterious epigrams passed on in the Indian tale “Al-Mu’tasim and the seven eights”, something which has not exactly made for easier listening. There are also echoes of the last optimist in Kafka who is said to have written the story on the label of his ear drops, in a minimum of words so that he could recount it to his friend, Max Brod, the next day, but when he only came to visit a week later, he had forgotten he had written it down on his ear drops. Rumour also has it that Spinoza, while he cut spectacle glasses, was already scribbling down notes for a story which was eventually never written by him. This story was based on the tradition of Rabbi Nahman and Bratslav and is “Livre brulé”, a book which the wise Rabbi flung into the fire. Finally – or should I say to start with – we also find traces of this story in the book “Life and works of Jan Sifr” which will be written by an as yet unknown writer who will live between 2044 and 2126. This book will be published in 2088 and form the cornerstone of a new economic model of society.

You are the first to hear this “Account of the Last Optimist” in the most complete reconstruction that gives due consideration to all versions, both existing and future, known at the moment.

The Account of the Last Optimist.

He used to eat dogs and lizards. When people came closer, he would crouch down and start to urinate vigorously. He survived by stealing gold teeth from mortuaries. And at least once a month, he was pelted with acorns and stones, which was his cue for

following the man or woman to a place behind a dilapidated house where children would usually come and bury the kittens under the rubble that were strangled by their dads. There, he was briefed on what was expected of him, and in exchange, he would receive bread, wine, cheese and a few pieces of fruit. His task was to spread evil rumours about this or that situation. The last optimist was used for this purpose, just because everyone knew that after him, optimism was no longer possible. They were invariably situations in which gloomy unrest had just broken out: an infectious virus in blood or computers, the reputation of a leader that was starting to falter, or the sturdiness of an engineer's construction that was called into doubt, the value of money, ... The last optimist spread a few carefully aimed, bad rumours, and the situation turned catastrophic. For his scandal mongering, he used dirty, and hence very effective, tricks which I will not expand on so as not to give anyone any ideas. The upshot of morbid scandal mongering was always the same: the levels of pessimism rose more quickly than a soufflé of rotten cheeses, and poisoned every form of trade and conversation until they completely collapsed. The last optimist had long gone by then, with his pay in a bright little knapsack. The obscenities and expletives of the worst kind were thrown back and forth, the entire community promptly fell prey to forms of decay that exhaust all levels of evil down to the very last scrap. Meanwhile, the last optimist was enjoying his glass of wine and eating his richly-filled sandwich, his task completed, his pay in his pocket, pessimism growing rampant like deadly termites. When even the blackest pessimism becomes ridiculous compared to the circumstance exacerbated to catastrophic levels by the person's own pessimism, that is when the first forms of inventiveness rear their heads. People start to experiment with circumspect, new models of conversation, trade and construction are tested, and the initial shoots of critical optimism are starting to take root once again. By that time, the last optimist's pay is spent and he is once again chewing on egg shells from dustbins and scaring the hell out of dogs with his smelly breath. There is harmony for a short while. Until he gets pelted again with acorns. He then follows this person, as per usual, to the place where the kittens killed by the fathers are buried, where he is given his next assignment. The lurking pessimism engenders, by his agency, a universally destructive pessimism, until from these ashes rise once again vulnerable forms of optimism. And this happens again and again during the entire minuscule history of humanity.

It is said that The Last Optimist never dies. Some claim that this is because he was never born in the first place, but this claim only betrays an allegorical interpretation of the story, something which is just as silly as claiming that the word 'rose' should really display the physical features of a girl, simply because some amorous fool has resorted to metaphors.

The only thing we know for sure is that he has existed throughout the ages. This we know because we found a diary fragment of the last optimist. We don't know if he intends to write this, has already written it or is writing it as I am recounting it to you. This is how it goes:

From the diary of the last optimist.

"I am the last optimist.

After me, the ridiculous dialectic will stop, the ping pong polemic of the optimism-pessimism see-saw; All finished.

I am a hireling. I deliver to order. I deliver to the weak.

To the minor servants of morality. To those who believe that pessimism is necessary, or those who believe that optimism is better. I deliver to the addicts, the addicts to their own mood and the addicts to indignation and responsibility. I myself am not a moral person. I drift from beginning to end, alone, without good luck or bad luck. I know no laws, no soil, no commandment.

I am at one with the town's rubbish and man, and at one with its magnificence.

I am at one with the insight into the riddle of all that is, and at one with the insight of the riddle of all that is not. I am the insight. I am who is. I am the one. Alone. I hand out the masks. There is no one like me, not even me."