

Multatuli as a writer of letters

As the editor of Multatuli's *Complete Works*, I am currently working on volume XXIII (and the end of the road is in sight, for there are to be 25 volumes in all).¹ In that capacity I quite often have to face irritated critics - especially from the ranks of the subsidizing institutions, since they are the ones who have had to cough up the necessary funds each year since 1949. Again and again the question is raised whether the series still deserves to be continued, and more notably whether there is any point in publishing all those letters from the period after May 1877 until the author's death in February 1887. For in the last ten years of his life Multatuli no longer wrote for publication, and so the letters written during that period cannot be expected to tell us anything new about Multatuli as an author, which was after all the prime objective of the enterprise. Usually my answer to such questions is that precisely because Multatuli is no longer writing for the public at large - which, in a famous phrase of his, he professed to despise ("Publiek, ik veracht u met grote verachting!") - we need his letters to his friends in order to reveal the thoughts that preoccupied him in his final years.

Multatuli's literary talents continue to shine undiminished in the numerous letters he wrote after May 1877, as I hope to demonstrate. But that is not the only reason why these letters occupy such an important position in his oeuvre. What is more important, and even fundamental, is that in his correspondence he was able to meet one of the essential demands he made on literature, which he could not meet by writing proper literary works. At the root of Multatuli's idea of literature lay his aversion to everything to do with official literature, literariness or *letterkundery*, as he called it. Multatuli himself was, from the outset of his career as a writer, well aware of the paradoxical nature of his attitude. On the very first page of *Max Havelaar* (1859), the protagonist Droogstoppel expresses amazement at the "impudence with which poets and storytellers dare to palm off on you all sorts of things which never happened, and which usually never could happen."² Soon after this initial show of indignation Droogstoppel launches into his glorious tirades against drama and poetry. The theatre is misleading because it accustoms us to lies, as he explains with persuasive arguments. He provides the following convincing

example: "The hero of the play is pulled out of the water by someone who's on the point of going bankrupt. For this, he gives him half his fortune. That can't be true [...] because it's obvious that, in that way, you only have to fall into the water twice to be reduced to beggary." In his invective against poetry, Droogstoppel comes up with an even more incisive analysis of the problem. "Mind you," he says, "I've no objection to verses in themselves. If you want words to form fours, its all right with me! But don't say anything that isn't true." And again Droogstoppel proves his case with devastating logic." It's all very well, he argues, for a poet to say 'The air is raw, the clock strikes four.' [...] But the versifier is bound to four o'clock by the *rawness* of the first line. For him it has to be exactly four o'clock, or else the air cannot be raw. And so he starts tampering with the truth." In short, rhyme and meter, being typical of the literary form, get in the way of the poet seeking to give an accurate portrayal of reality.

Of course it would not be fair to take Droogstoppel's down-to-earth outpourings as completely representing his creator's own views, but Multatuli returned to this very issue in one of the footnotes he added to *Max Havelaar* in the 1881 edition. He says, "I am far from disagreeing with *everything* I put into Droogstoppel's mouth. He normally never had anything to do with verses of the kind that follow here. Well, neither have I!" But in fact the dilemma was even more painful. For anyone seeking to create art will find himself obliged to deviate from completely truthful representation. In his Postscript to the play *De bruid daarboven* (The Bride in Heaven), Multatuli expresses his feelings about the necessity of exaggeration. "Het ideaal der kunst zou vorderen dat het vereist effect werd te weeg gebracht zonder overdrijving". But art resists such absolute fidelity. For, he says,

'Lezer, hebt ge wel eens komedie gespeeld? Of zaagt ge wel eens de decoratieschermen van naby? De eis der "planken" [...] is: overdrijving. Wat niet overdreven is in feite, vertoont zich by 't voetlicht laf, flauw, onbeduidend, kleurloos. Om effect te maken, moeten auteur, decoratieschilder en vertoners hun

instrumenten enige tonen hoger stellen,
dan binnenkamers voor correct zou
gehouden worden.'

And of course the conclusion Multatuli draws from his reflection on this inevitable distortion is that the author simply has no choice but to deviate from stark reality.

Remarkably, very similar arguments concerning the deficient veracity of art are to be found in Plato. The dialogue entitled *The Sophist*, in particular, offers comparable examples. A picture of a knife will always lack the prime "knifish" qualities: the picture itself cannot be sharp or hard or heavy. But worse than that, countless artists have discovered to their chagrin that they have to be *deliberately* untrue in their representations. Plato argues that if the columns of a temple were truly straight all the way to the top, they would not look straight. In order to appear straight to the viewer they have to be wider towards the capital. And Multatuli, for his part, sums it all up by saying: "Met burgerlyke droogstoppelige waarheid vervaardigt men geen drama."

The reason why this should be so is explained in more detail in a letter to Busken Huet.³ A well-composed work of art must be to some extent untruthful, because, Multatuli says, "de betrekkelijke volkomenheid ligt niet in de natuur der dingen," and that therefore "een goed stuk onnatuurlyk moet zyn. De kunst eischt iets aferonds, iets compleets, iets volkomens dat de natuur nooit levert [...] wie zich toelegt op waarheid moet wel hakkelige dingen voortbrengen."

There lies the dilemma. Unless one is resigned to creating fragmentary, "hakkelige" things, one is obliged to take liberties with reality, which is never comprehensive or perfectly formed. Multatuli himself had acquired this insight after considerable trials and tribulations of his own. He himself had had a bitter experience of the conflict between truth and beauty, in the years following the acclaimed publication of *Havelaar*. The showers of praise for the beauty of the book ultimately meant that it was regarded as just a romance, and therefore as fictitious. *Havelaar* had not been rehabilitated - truth had not triumphed!

Multatuli's most convincing exposé of his quandary is to be found in the first volume of *Ideeën*. It is convincing especially because he adopts an engaging literary form in the "parable" of the seamstress and her child. *Idee 79* says that the prettier the clothes the woman dresses her baby in, the less people notice the child itself. The child's name is Truth, Multatuli explains. The child's father was the Poet. This story sums up Multatuli's own experience: the charming clothes, the beautiful literary form of *Max Havelaar*, prevented the

public from seeing the real meaning of the novel, his child.

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So the naked Truth, the complete absence of premeditated design, of literary form, seems to be the solution. And that is indeed the attitude Douwes Dekker, writing as Multatuli, often felt drawn to. Not surprisingly, Dekker relished the opportunity of letting himself go in his letters to friends - since those writings were not intended "for the press", as he put it, and his enjoyment of being released from the dictates of literary form is unmistakable. Thus on 24 January 1876 Multatuli started a long letter to his friend Loffelt.⁴ He finished it two days later, adding a note about his untidiness at the top of the page: "Ik schryf altyd heel slordig als 't niet voor de pers is. Dat [...] vermaakt me [...] Corrigeer maar zelf, waar ik wat brabbel. Bedenk dat ik 'n hekel aan schryven heb."

The free form of the letter was a great advantage, since it dispensed with the need to manifest an acquired artistry. It is only in the letter, addressed to a single eager respondent, that the formal impositions of literature can be avoided, that there is no need to lie for the sake of beauty. In that sense, Multatuli meant what he said when he told van Hall, in a letter dated 27 December 1875, that he particularly enjoyed writing pieces that would not go to press: "Ik houd er zoo van als 't niet naar de pers moet. Van de 'pers' ben ik misselyk." He excuses himself to his friends for rambling on, but has no intention for the time being of changing his ways.

He likes to pretend that his letters are committed to paper spontaneously, without either premeditation or revision. In a letter to Tiele (9 December 1877) he offers an explanation, in a parenthetical aside, for the untidiness he permits himself: "ik ben zoo vry in brieven als dezen my slordigheden te veroorloven. Het tegendeel zou ik onvriendschappelyk vinden." In other words, you are a good reader, you do not need any embellishments. His allusions to the spontaneity of his writing in his correspondence with friends are remarkably frequent. In a postscript to a letter dated 15 September 1875 he mentions that he never rereads his letters: "ik lees m'n brieven niet na. Als er hier of daar 'n zin niet rondloopt, vul maar aan." In fact such allusions occur so frequently that one cannot avoid feeling that they represent a programmatic viewpoint rather than a mere statement of fact.

However, it is often possible to tell from minor corrections that the letters (or at least some of them) must have been read over before they were sent off, that

they were scrutinized for stylistic impurities and obscure formulations. A typical example is to be found in one of his letters to Mimi, dated 26 February 1878. He tells her about his visit to her sister Frederique, after having sent a note to her husband Pool. His original words were: "Ik schreef reeds voor m'n bezoek aan Fredi aan Pool." But this casual turn of phrase evidently did not please him on second thoughts. So he changed the first *aan* into *by* - an obvious stylistic improvement, and sufficient reason for us editors of the recent volumes of the *Complete Works* to indicate this kind of correction from now on in the annotations to the letters. The emendations are almost without exception interesting, because they are implicit manifestations of Multatuli's epistolary aesthetic. When he changes "waarm'trent ik u eigenlyk schryven wou" into "waarover ik u eigenlyk schryven wou", it is of course because he wants to avoid officialese. Especially subtle is the painstaking removal of a typographical accent in a letter to Funke of 27 November 1876, in which his diagnosis of his new enemy, Buys,⁵ reads: "hy stelt zich als halfgek aan om de aandacht te trekken" (XVIII, 537). The stress had been on *als* which, combined with "stelt zich aan", produces a form of pleonasm, so he crossed the accent out. Thus even a minimal stylistic imperfection could in his view do with improvement. The programmatic artlessness of the style of his letters evidently did not stop Multatuli from correcting shortcomings once he had noticed them. And there is a lot of circumstantial evidence that he re-read his longer epistles for this express purpose.

Multatuli's letters are, as we know, often composed of a succession of separate paragraphs, each dealing with a specific subject. As soon as such a subject had been exhausted (for the time being), Multatuli would mark it off with a horizontal dash several centimetres long, starting from the left margin. The vast majority of the letters, which are usually signed Dek, Douwes Dekker or with his initials DD, contain postscripts in which the letter is simply carried on, often until the sheet of paper is full. These second thoughts have partly to do with Multatuli's dislike of providing an orderly finish. It is no coincidence that *Havelaar* ends with a sort of explosion rather than with a conventionally elegant closure. *Woutertje Pieterse* and *Aleid* were not given a proper ending either. A well considered rounding-off of a narrative evidently represented for Dekker the ultimate untruth. For when do events in reality ever reach a formally pleasing conclusion?

But besides these what we might call poetical reasons for the continuation of a letter beyond the signature, there is another explanation. The postscript often contains afterthoughts about matters dealt with earlier in the

body of the letter. The existence of such codas, in which he returns to the subjects discussed previously, proves in my view that Multatuli was in the habit of reading over what he had written and would then, inspired by his own exposé, put the finishing touches to his argument.

In spite of the apologies for his supposed carelessness, in the letters to his friends, he actually wants to make a candid and careless impression, and he achieves his aim thanks to his natural stylistic ability. Compared with the ornate and monumental style adopted by most other letter-writers of the period, Multatuli's letters are indeed masterpieces of artlessness.

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Another curious paradox emerges on closer scrutiny of the letters. Multatuli, for all his self-centered outpourings about his own condition, ideas and circumstances, is always keenly aware of the character and intellectual level of the person he is writing to. As a letter-writer he adapts himself to the impression he expects his letter to make on the recipient. This is what I would call a rhetorically pragmatic approach: Multatuli the letter-writer is constantly taking into account the field of interest and the personal circumstances of the other person. A very straightforward illustration of this is to be found in a letter to Mimi dated 5 March 1878, in which he says: "Denk niet aan m'n haastig schryven dat ik zenuwachtig ben. Ik ben juist heel prettig en helder." He is obviously imagining how Mimi, at home in Wiesbaden, will pore over his letters in an effort to read between the lines. On other occasions, anticipating any misunderstandings that might arise with his correspondent, he makes a little drawing to show exactly what he means.

Multatuli's ability to identify with his correspondents is reflected in what I would like to call his chameleon-like skills. Here too his stylistic versatility produces a paradox: he who always prides himself on his entirely uninhibited attitude to his public, and who can afford to be even more candid in his correspondence with friends, in fact proves to be extremely sensitive to the conditions of the recipients of his letters. As a result, his letters to his various friends are remarkably different, not only in subject-matter but also in tone and style, and even in handwriting.

The literary scholar J.N. van Hall, editor of the journal *Het Nederlandsch Toneel*, received long letters on the subject of the dramatic arts. Multatuli's eloquent prose is interspersed with a great deal of exotic terminology. One of his letters to van Hall, dated 27 December 1875, contains 28 annotations referring to French expressions, five to German, and four to Latin!

To the historian and linguist P.A. Tiele, Curator of the University Library in Leiden, Multatuli writes of his experiences with the historical works of Bor and Wagenaar, and at some length about his objections to Goethe's *Werther*. His style is drier here, more scholarly, and especially more tautly structured. This produces brilliant passages such as the following, which, it seems to me, embodies one of the fundamental principles underlying Multatuli's thinking in this period. It concerns the necessity of a basic unifying principle, an essential desire for oneness in both art and life:

Geen poëzie zonder wellust. Poëzie, één met wysbegeerte, eischt het *volledig* gebruik van *alle* fakulteiten des gemoeds, dus ook van dien hoofdfactor in 't bewerktuigd *Zyn*, neen in alle stof, namelyk van de *zucht tot één zyn* die identisch is met *bestaan*. In physika noemen we 't aantrekkingskracht, in zielkunde heet het genegenheid, vriendschap, liefde. Alles wil (wahlverwandschaftlich) *naderen, in-zyn*, vereenigen. In chemie is *scheiden* niets dan voorkeur voor vereeniging met wat anders.

Multatuli's letters to Waltman⁶ and Funke are warmer, more relaxed. At times he adopts a somewhat fatherly tone, offering advice on such things as what to do about Waltman's fits of coughing in the night, and about the size of Funke's family: after five children he thinks it is enough now. Fellow-writer Carel Vosmaer is one of his intimate friends during this period; he elicits a particular *parlando* tone, as if they were having a friendly conversation on the telephone.

Je begrypt dat ik ook de andere stukken met de grootste belangstelling lezen zal (of herlezen). Maar houd me svp eens op de hoogte van de kritiek. Ik stel me daarvan ergernis voor, nu ja. Maar toch, ik wil nu eens goed opletten hoe dat stuk, en Uw heelen III bundel ontvangen wordt! Met visschig zwygen? Ja, houd me op de hoogte! Hartelyk goeden nacht!

The letters to Mimi are in a class of their own. In them the psychological identification with the reader on the level of content, composition and style is the most marked. I would call it Mimi-cry. He sends her "heel erge kussen", and evokes the intimacy of the bedroom with little private jokes. Multatuli's chameleon-like qualities as a letter writer are even reflected in his handwriting. A.W. Sijthoff, publisher of the prestigious *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, whom he did not know personally, received a letter written in a

disciplined, extremely regular hand, while the notes he sent to Mimi in Germany when he was travelling in Holland are written in obvious haste, full of flourishes and long dashes.

Thus we see from Multatuli's own correspondence what sort of demands he made on the letter as a form of communication. Multatuli for his part also expected other letter-writers to aim at true contact, intense, free from conventions and polite inanities, full of understanding for the addressee. When he was away on tour in Holland, he begged Mimi to write to him daily, even if only briefly and about unimportant routine things, just so long as he received word from her every day. He could be upset for days on end when he believed a letter had been lost. The anxiety about things not reaching him could assume obsessive proportions. He sent instructions to the directors of all the main post offices about forwarding his mail, and he prepared detailed lists of dates and places where he could be reached, which he sent to all his correspondents.

Already when he was in Brussels in the 1860's, his fear that Tine's letters might get lost in the post is out of all proportion. Multatuli grumbled a lot about the postal services, which were quite a bit better than what we have to put up with nowadays. He was still grumbling in 1878, when he calculated that a letter from Wiesbaden had taken 22 hours to reach him in Holland. He complained that since the journey itself took less than half that time, that was far too slow.

Not only did he insist on receiving mail from Mimi daily, he was also particular about what it contained. On 12 March 1878 he scolds Mimi for sending him a thick envelope, containing also a letter to someone else. "Ik ben nog steeds kwaad op je. Hoe kan je me 'n dik envelop zenden met 'n brief voor 'n ander?" And Multatuli himself has the delicacy to warn Mimi not to be disappointed when the special-delivery envelope he is sending her shortly turns out not to contain money: "Als de eerstvolgende brief aangetekend is, denk dan niet dat er geld in is; dat is zoo mal, want al heb je nu geen haast, het kon toch 'n teleurstelling wezen."

He demanded of others that they should show the same consideration for him. In February 1878 he received a letter in French from his daughter Nonni, after a long silence. He is offended because her hasty note contains so little apart from renewed requests for money. He replies with some severity: "Le chagrin me rend impuissant. J'avoue que cette fois-ci du moins je m'attendais à une lettre, une véritable lettre de ta part." A proper letter, in Multatuli's view, is one in which the writer's truthful expression of his feelings is coupled

with sensitivity towards the correspondent.

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But one of the strongest arguments in favour of publishing the correspondence from the last ten years of Multatuli's life is that, under more fortunate circumstances, those letters would have yielded the material for an eighth volume in the series of *Ideeën*. Take the following hilarious passage with "medical ideas" about the reasons why one catches cold. It comes from a letter to Waltman:

De difteritische aandoeningen van de keel begonnen in de ziektegeschiedenis der menschen 'n hoofdrol te spelen in de periode der hooge stropdassen, bouffantes, cachenez &c. Dit nu is geen bewys dat keelziekten uit kunstmatig aangebrachten warmte voortspruit, maar 't geeft stof tot nadenken, vooral in verband met andere opmerkingen. De hals der vrouwen was ten-allen-tyde minder bedekt dan van de mannen. Als 't warmhouden nuttig was, moesten de vrouwen meer dan de mannen aan de keel souffreeren, *en dit is zoò niet.*

In a letter dated 5 April 1877 to the colonial administrator G.J.A. Boulet, he is more outspoken about his fears for the future of the colonies than he ever was in print:

Indien men 't Hollandsch gezag verjaagt, vóór de stevige grondslagen van zelfregering gelegd zyn (waartoe grooter eensegezindheid in de oppositie vereischt wordt, dan er tot nog toe bestaat!) dan zie ik met schrik het moment te-gemoet dat men den 'hollandschen tyd' nog betreuren zal. Anarchie, heerschappy van Amerikaanse vrybuiters, van europeesch kanaille, zouden vreeselyke gevolgen hebben. Land en Volk zyn te goed voor zoo'n proef.

Convinced by the strength of his own arguments, it seems, Multatuli goes on to add, "ik geef u volkomen vryheid deze denkbeelden te verspreiden als ge weer op Java zult terug gekeerd zyn."

I myself am particularly fond of his scathing comments about professors of literature. In a letter to Loffelt, ridiculing van Vloten,⁷ he says:

V.VI. was *hoogleeraar* in litteratuur (*Zegge in 't spreken* over litteratuur). Een medisch professor onderwyst: *hoe men zieken geneest*, d. w. z. hoe men *gezondheid produceert*. De professors in litteratuur bepalen zich voor 7/8 tot voorlezingen *over menschen die boeken gemaakt hebben*, en wachten zich gewoonlyk wel voor 't *leveren* van letterkundige pronkstukken. Hoeveel beroemde werken zyn er door *hoogleeraren* geleverd?

That the letters, in spite of their informal tone and composition, are often by no means inferior to the published works, is shown by the abundance of magnificently phrased passages. He sums up the idea that trying to convert heathens to Christianity without teaching them the basics of the creed is like trying to build a house without foundations, "men kan de rez de chaussée van 't gebouw niet missen." Whoever believes in heavenly salvation must also accept the alternative of damnation in hell, "anders is 't 'n schaar met één lemmet." And his assessment of the future of Insulinde becomes all the more ominous when he draws the almost Homeric comparison between the colony and a fine horse that must be bridled if it is to be saved from ruin:

Insulinde is 'n prachtig paard waarop 'n dief zit. Dat men dien dief er afwerpt, is best. Maar men moet het niet doen voor men 't beest aan den teugel heeft, daar 't anders de wildernis inloopt en, onbestuurd, van de rotsen te-pletter valt.

Multatuli's correspondence can be divided into three main categories forming concentric circles around him. The first ring comprises the intimate letters with those closest to him, and it is largely made up of letters written to Mimi during his absences. The next ring comprises the letters to like-minded correspondents and friends, in which Multatuli indulges his fondness for plain speaking. The third, outer ring is made up of formal notes to business relations. It is especially the correspondence of the second category that can be seen, for reasons of both content and style, as the continuation of Multatuli's literary output after he stopped publishing. To someone like me, whose prime interest is in Dekker as a writer, there is no doubt whatsoever that the publication of all the letters, up to the bitter end in February 1887, must proceed.

NOTES

¹ Multatuli: *Volledige Werken* vols. 1 - 23, Amsterdam: van Oorschot, 1950-92. This year (1992) vol. 23 will appear, next year vol. 24, and in 1994 the last one, vol. 25, containing the indexes, repertoria etc. The more than two thousand letters of Multatuli that are preserved and edited in this edition are now kept in the Multatuli Museum, Korsjespoortsteeg 20, Amsterdam.

² I quote from *Max Havelaar* in the English translation by Roy Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1987). Droogstoppel's remarks are on p. 19 and 21, and the author's note about them on p. 328-9. The translation is British, which is why the translator makes "four" and "raw" rhyme.

³ Conrad Busken Huet (1826-1886), Dutch writer and famous critic of his time.

⁴ Antonie C. Loffelt (1841-1906), a person of independent means who was a close friend of Multatuli. Van Hall and Tiele will be identified later in the paper.

⁵ George L. Funke (1836-1995), publisher of Multatuli's literary works since 1870, and his benefactor and friend. A[nton?] Buys (1842-1906), former disciple of Multatuli who later wrote a book against him entitled *Gedachten* (Amsterdam, 1878).

⁶ Jan Waltman jr. (1839-1891), publisher of some of Multatuli's earlier works.

⁷ Johannes van Vloten (1818-1883), Dutch author and philosopher, and early friend of Multatuli who later became his opponent.