

ANNA LOUISA GEERTRUYDA BOSBOOM-TOUSSAINT (1812-1886)

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A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint was born in Alkmaar in 1812 from Huguenot stock. From her eighth year she was educated by her grandparents in Harlingen. After study for a teacher's certificate and a teaching post in Hoorn as governess (1833), she went back to Alkmaar. Because of her earlier publications, especially *De graaf van Devonshire* (1839), she came into contact with the influential circle around *De Gids*. Her betrothal to the critic Bakhuizen van den Brink was called off when the latter had to flee Holland because of debts. After her marriage, in 1851, with the well-known painter Johannes Bosboom, she was established in The Hague where she died in 1886.

Anna Louisa Geertruyda (Truitje) Toussaint (later: Bosboom-Toussaint), "onze grootste negentiende eeuwse auteur van verhalend proza," according to G. W. Huygens, is a transitional figure in whose development the history of Dutch literature between the 1830s and 1870s can be demonstrated admirably. After practising, in the 1830s, the "dominant prose genre" of the time, the historical novel (Meyer 206), Bosboom-Toussaint came to shed the overpowering influence of English Romanticism, above all of Walter Scott, and "graduated" to a psychologically more modern and subtle type of novel, exemplified above all in *Majoor Frans* (1874), thereby repeating essentially what was happening in Dutch literature between the same dates.

Truitje Toussaint was fortunate enough to have had a father whose readings extended not only to the European Classics (among the French Racine, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, De Lamartine, and Alexandre Dumas; among the Germans Schiller, Goethe and Jean Paul; among the English Byron and above all Walter Scott), but whose library must have contained a fair amount of important Dutch literature, since a number of influences of contemporary Dutch authors can be traced in the daughter's works. The young woman must have in any case struck contemporaries by her intelligence, her solid education (she obtained a teaching certificate), and most of all her obvious powers of imagination and her understanding of the human psyche.

These assets she was able to expand upon--albeit with more pain than pleasure--when she became engaged to the brilliant but frivolous critic, historian, and editor of the newly-founded *De Gids* (since 1837, under the editorship of E. J. Potgieter), Reiner Bakhuizen van den Brink (1810-1865), who taught her to practise solid research before writing the historical novels which constitute her first literary efforts.

The whole of Europe had been swept up in a frenzy over the historical novel ever since Walter Scott revived the genre and modernized it by applying methods of research only recently acquired in the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In Holland, Jacob van Lennep, the author of *Nederlandse Legenden*, had already cultivated the genre, though without much depth; by contrast, Aarnout Drost's main work, the novel *Hermingard van de Eikenterpen* (1832), which dealt with Christianity's struggles during the fourth century, carried a message which obviously was the result of the author's personal convictions, that of an evangelical Christianity which is opposed to Christianity seeking secular power.

Dutch practitioners of the historical novel did not at first determine the character of Bosboom-Toussaint's work, however. Her very first effort, the novella *Almagro* (1837), inspired by an episode from Friedrich Schiller's drama *Die Räuber*, showed, rather, the influence of Scott and the English Romantics. A subsequent collection of stories, *De echtgenoten van Turin* (1839),

similarly contains many romantic elements, though there is a first halting attempt to ground the characters in a more or less consistent psychology.

Much more important is her first major novel, *De Graaf van Devonshire* (1838), a novel praised by the editors of *De Gids*. In her preface to the book, Bosboom-Toussaint formulates her own ideas about the genre of the historical novel, a theory she was later to expand primarily over and against Walter Scott's. Whereas Scott attempted to describe the customs and morals of the bygone centuries, and introduced "romantic" elements only to create more interest, Bosboom-Toussaint argues that she is concerned mainly with the characters and their emotions; historical accuracy, which results from research, is for her a means not to sin against veracity and local colour. First and foremost for Bosboom-Toussaint, however, comes the subject itself, which is essentially a character's personal drama resulting from historical circumstances, and which must "inspire" her, catch her imagination, because it invites analysis and explanation: the subject is, in a certain sense, a "riddle" to be solved by the author.

Since historic events and circumstances function primarily as an invitation for an interpretation of history in as far as it concerns the impact of such events on selected characters, it is not surprising to find that Bosboom-Toussaint, in those cases where tradition is incomplete, feels quite at liberty to invent and fill in the empty spaces in the documentation. However, despite this claim to artistic liberty, the author is in practice more often than not apt to cling to historical details and shower the reader with her knowledge, sometimes to the extent of quoting original sources in their entirety, thereby in fact often becoming rather tedious. This is certainly the case in both *De Engelschen te Rome* (1839) and *Lord Edward Glenhouse* (1840).

Two factors account for a significant shift in Bosboom-Toussaint's production after

1840, however. There is first of all the criticism to which E.J. Potgieter subjected *De Graaf van Devonshire*, as being inspired by a foreign subject. Potgieter and Bakhuizen van den Brink were in the process of attempting to narrow the European movement of Romanticism, in order to create a specifically Dutch Romanticism. The historical novel in particular was to serve a national purpose: its subject material ought, in their minds, to come primarily from the period of the Dutch Golden Age, the seventeenth century, and was to trace modern political institutions and existing situations back to their origins in this period. Since it was felt that such literature would bolster national pride, a clear didactic purpose was attached to the genre of the historical novel.

A second factor influencing Bosboom-Toussaint's career at this time was the increasingly important role that her thinking about Protestantism came to play. Through her contacts with the circle of Heilo (Hasebroek, Nicolaas Beets, Willem de Clercq), she made the ideas of the so-called *Réveil* her own. This movement, initiated by the poet Willem Bilderdijk, and carried on by such disciples as Isaac Da Costa, was intended to counter the rationalistic and superficial type of religion predominant in Holland at this time, and designed to lead to a deeper and more committed Christianity. It appealed to Bosboom-Toussaint, whose unorthodox-liberal outlook, inherited from her father, could not fit into the more rigid, rule-oriented and rather intolerant Protestantism of her time.

The first product of these two factors is the novel *Het Huis Lauernesse* (1840). The subject should have pleased the editors of *De Gids*, since it deals with the time of the Dutch Reformation, and describes the process whereby the *Jonkvrouw* of the Utrecht castle Lauernesse, under the influence of the preacher Paul van Mansfeld, abandons the Catholic Church, thereby sparking a violent conflict with her

fiancé, Aernoud Reiniersz, an imperial officer. That the novel was nevertheless not reviewed by *De Gids* was not because of its method, as the scholarship for this novel was exemplary, and, in the words of Gerard Knuvelder, "naar het recept van Bakhuizen en Potgieter toebereid" (248), but because of the obvious tolerance with which figures both Catholic and Protestant are treated. Bosboom-Toussaint's "humanistisch christendom" (Knuvelder 249), the result of her acquaintance with the ideas of the *Réveil*, shows particularly in the author's treatment of the vicar of the bishopric of Utrecht, a quasi-Erasmian figure.

The principles already laid down by Bosboom-Toussaint in the preface of *De Graaf van Devonshire* are clearly demonstrated in this novel: the emphasis is on the effects of the Reformation on individual characters and groups, whose psychology is investigated and shown in reaction to historic events. Unfortunately, there are many excursions, meditations, and reflections which retard the flow of the novel, and too many bald facts which prevent the present-day reader from being charmed by the story; moreover, the psychology of the characters is often wooden, static, and schematic.

Much the same comments can be made, and have been made, about Bosboom-Toussaint's next major work, the monumental trilogy known as the Leycester-Cycle. It consists of *Leycester in Nederland* (1846), which deals with the activities of Queen Elisabeth's ambassador to the Netherlands during his first sojourn (December 1585 to the end of 1586); *De Vrouwen uit het Leycestersche tijdvak* (1850); and *Gideon Florensz* (1855), the latter dealing with the second sojourn of Leycester in Holland. In preparation for the writing of this rather daunting work, the author had spent several years researching the subject, with the intention to render history as closely as possible to the truth. True to her principles, and despite the rigorous research of the historic facts, the psychology of her

characters is nevertheless clearly intended to be the more important element of the novels. But since we are dealing with a "re-creation" of a reality for which few sources and little documentation are available, this cannot but mean a great deal of liberty and invention on the part of the author: a contradiction of principles from which there is no real escape, and one of which the author herself had been aware from the start.

The fascination which the figure of Leycester originally exerted upon the author (a necessary condition for her art, as we have seen), can be explained because of what Bosboom-Toussaint makes him stand for: the kind of enlightened, tolerant Christian for whom the *Réveil* had provided the idealized model. In the figure of Gideon Florenz, moreover, she has re-created the character of Paul Mansfeld in *Het huis Lauernes*; both preachers are concerned above all with a Christianity which is a matter of the heart, rather than of orthodoxy.

That the cycle is nevertheless not necessarily "haar grootste prestatie" (de Vooys and Stuyveling 113), is the fault of two characteristics which dominate all of Bosboom-Toussaint's historical novels. There is first, as has been indicated, the dichotomy, or perhaps even the contradiction between the principle of historic veracity (which concerns the novel as a work of history), and the original inspiration and final aim of the author to re-create with imagination and suggestion (which concerns the novel as a work of art). When these two aims do not coincide, the work remains ambivalent, the didactic and merely factual parts of the novel do not fuse with the imaginary episodes and characters. This is a problem with which most historical novels are confronted, but which in the case of Bosboom-Toussaint strikes the reader as particularly acute.

The second reason is one which is also valid for most of the historical novels of

Bosboom-Toussaint. It is the difficulty of bringing characters to life, because of their deficient psychology, despite the author's stated intentions. This lack is aggravated by a prose style which, in the rhetorical tradition of Bilderdijk and Potgieter, leads to considerable difficulties for the modern-day reader. Only in the *Vrouwen uit het Leycestersche tijdvak* does Bosboom-Toussaint escape from both weaknesses, no doubt because here the focus is on the fate of individual women, rather than on the more abstract course of history. One has the feeling that precisely because of the lack of true documentary material, the author was able to give her imagination free rein, with much more interesting results than in the other two volumes.

A more pronounced focus on the female psyche and women's fate stood the author in good stead also in her next important novel, *Mejonkvrouwe de Mauléon* (1847), "een meesterwerk" according to Knuvelder (257). Once again, the source was a foreign work, Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV*. This time the author's intention was not so much to give a picture of an historical period, but to describe the emotionally charged youthful love between the theologian and historian Jacques Bénigne Bossuet and Yolande Desvieux. This love was to have lead to marriage, but Bossuet's obvious talents caused those able to further his career to destine him for the Church. In the view of this higher mission, Yolande sets Bossuet free, but in spirit remains faithful to him. Bossuet, in turn, makes possible Yolande's purchase of the castle of Mauléon, where he often visits her. Yolande remains independent and seemingly uninterested in other young men, with the result that her behaviour arouses suspicion in her social circles.

The novel returns in certain respects to the earlier works of Bosboom-Toussaint, in the use of intrigues, mysterious events, mysterious characters (especially a very young priest who is associated with both Bossuet and Yolande, and whose origins are

never revealed). All these elements contribute to the fascination with which the reader follows the story; the language, moreover, is much more supple, and the psychology of the characters much more convincing than in previous novels. Especially Yolande's selfsacrificing attitude as a foil to Bossuet's basic egotism gives the novel its feel of veracity, even though in this case the novel is largely a product of the imagination, not of historical fact.

In Yolande Desvieux the author has created a figure which can be called an immediate predecessor to the character of Francis Mordaunt, the female protagonist of Bosboom-Toussaint's last major novel, *Majoer Frans* (1874). If there is one novel by Bosboom-Toussaint which can still be called alive and well today, it is this one, and this is due above all to the wonderful way the free and independent, high-spirited and slightly outrageous young woman dominates the action and holds the reader's attention. Another reason that the attention of the reader is maintained is the fact that the novel is analytical, in that the character and circumstances of the *freule* are only gradually revealed, either through passages narrated by the main characters or by the interaction between the male protagonist, Jonker Leopold van Zonshoven, and his cousin Francis. This allows, even forces, the reader to identify with the male protagonist, whose main goal in this novel is to discover whether Francis is a suitable partner for marriage, as stipulated as part of the will of his aunt.

Leopold's mission is a delicate one: though he is under no legal obligation to marry Francis in order to inherit a million guilders, he feels morally obliged, because of the wrong done to Francis' family; at the same time, he cannot appear to be acting out of greed or appear to want to force the young woman. He has been informed of Francis' idiosyncrasies, which the reader gradually comes to recognize as the "symptoms" of an emancipated young woman. The moral outrage and the often

vicious gossip concerning Francis at first put Leopold on guard, but it is to the young man's credit that he does not let himself be scared away, and faithfully pursues his road.

Once he encounters Francis, however, Leopold's mind is quickly made up. What develops is partly a comedy, partly a tragedy. It is the age-old battle of the sexes, though with considerably more subtlety than in Shakespeare's case. Leopold is a tolerant, almost liberated male, whose efforts to "convert" Francis into a more traditional female do not tend in the direction of domination, but of modification. Francis' struggle to maintain her freedom is partly still in the tradition of Enlightenment comedy, and in certain episodes she is made the target of the author's own irony. Nevertheless, Leopold and, we feel, Bosboom-Toussaint, would like to preserve most of Francis' admirable morality and straight-forwardness, and to only sacrifice those aspects of her character which are the result of her bitter experiences and of a certain amount of exaggeration. In this respect the resolution of the conflict (which does not come about easily, and involves a number of *péripéties*), is in the nature almost of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in which the original dichotomies have been overcome, though not eliminated.

The novel is composed in the form of a series of letters by Leopold to his friend Willem Verheyest, a lawyer who has

accepted a post in the Dutch East Indies. This convention is a mere excuse to tie the action to a chronological scheme in which Leopold's discovery of Francis' character and background runs parallel with the reader's own process of discovery. The reader thereby remains as much in suspense, and as uninformed, as Leopold, and interest in the action remains great.

Bosboom-Toussaint has again increased the tension in the novel by introducing certain "mysterious" events and certain traits in her characters which only become understandable in the light of later revelations. These revelations mostly take the form of narratives by the several characters, though sometimes also letters etc. are introduced. Because of these narratives, the whole novel has a rather episodic structure, but this looseness is counterbalanced perfectly by the quite modern psychology of the novel, and above all by the unifying force of the main female character, Francis, a truly remarkable creation.

With *Majoor Frans*, Bosboom-Toussaint can be said to stand on the threshold of the modern Dutch psychological novel; and whereas her historical novels are still of significance, from a generic point of view as well as from the point of view of Dutch literary history, *Majoor Frans* has an intrinsic interest which explains its frequent re-appearance in various kinds of popular editions and in a number of translations.

Works by A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint

- Almagro*. 1837.
- De Graaf van Devonshire*. 1838.
- De Engelschen te Rome*. 1839.
- Het Huis Lauernesse*. 1839.
- Lord Edward Glenhouse*. 1840.
- Eene Kroon voor Karel den Stouten*. 1841.
- Leycester in Nederland*. 1846.
- Mejonkorouwe de Mauléon*. 1847.
- De Vrouwen uit het Leyestersche tijdvak*. 1850.
- Gideon Florensz*. 1855.

De Delftse Wonderdokter. 1870.

Majoer Frans. 1874.

Romantische Werken (collected works, incomplete). 1886.

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