

MULTATULI AND ROMANTIC INDECISION

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At the Institute of Netherlandic Studies in Amsterdam, where I teach modern literature, the same problem presents itself every year: when romanticism comes up for discussion, the writers of this period seem to take an ambiguous attitude towards the Christian faith which is difficult to explain.

On the one hand the Dutch romanticists are children of "The Enlightenment" to such an extent that they are extremely critical of the dogmatic authority of the bible and of the church as a traditional institution. On the other hand the disappearance of the security of a joint religion leads to a desperate searching for new ties that are often found in a more emotional, more inward form of religiousness, which, in the thirties and forties of the last century led to a powerful movement of religious resurgence, the so-called 'Reveil' (=+ Awakening). The students repeatedly have difficulties with that paradoxical, at the same time pro and anti-christian attitude. (At least we, the teachers, have difficulties explaining it).

Multatuli rises as a literary giant, head and shoulders above the mediocrity of his period, and thus he also represents the romantic ambivalence towards religion in a gigantic manner, in his works. Never have the christian doctrinal points been ridiculed with more sarcasm, and never professed with more avid conviction. He who looks into these points in his work and life, sets his eyes upon a highly enlightening illustration of the romantic paradox in question.

Douwes Dekker (the real name of Multatuli), born in 1820 in Amsterdam, grew up in a baptist milieu where Christianity was professed in an unorthodox, but fundamental way¹: the baptists did not want to form an ordinary, neat congregation with all the institutions belonging to it, with elders and synods, but they took the true christian message to the letter; they refused to carry weapons, to take an oath and did not take up any civic service. Often in those circles "home-practices" were held where laymen would explain the bible to each other.

Dekker's father was a captain in the foreign trade, who often was absent from home for months. The young Eduard, therefore, did not have much reason to stand up against religion, as could have been the case if it were imposed upon him with strict ecclesiastic and paternal authority. He went to the Latin School, because he was predestined to become a chaplain, just like his eldest brother Piet who was a chaplain for his whole life.

Did this milieu put its stamp on Douwes Dekker? Was he in his youth

actually influenced by this gentle, but fundamental variety of the Protestant Christianity? Let us see what the writer tells us about this himself. In 1862, 42 years of age, he looks with a certain endearment back upon the image of God that he had in his youth. At least this was a God to whom people could relate and who would not hesitate to put his shoulder to the wheel: a strict but amiable father-figure.

In these memoirs² Multatuli asks for His help in his fight against the apathies of his fellow-countrymen and then writes -- in the beautiful metrical prose that one can hardly render into equivalent English -- "Up, up, thou God, help us! Hold out your hands, strike once to the left and once to the right and above all things do not be weaker in your acts than they described you in the bible of my youth. There you sat on a high throne of clouds, looking grim (...) You were wrathful, jealous from time to time, sometimes capricious and disposed to bad moods, as can be expected from old gods, who, being alone for so long, and therefore in bad company, get bored. But still, although you did not look amiable, still I felt respect, fear or whatever it was... I felt something, when nanny reprimanded me because I asked if she had known you without a beard and if you had been young, as anyone else. Those were forbidden questions, the woman told me, and I would be damned if I asked them again. Fine. Henceforth I kept the questions to myself. And if I brewed some mischief...oh, do you recollect, how I once - it was awful - with charcoal drew glasses on your nose? Honestly, it was just a pastime, no malicious intent! (...) How scared I was! How my heart trembled at the thought that someone would discover the glasses and ask: who has put the glasses on God's nose? (...) But in those times I understood you. I lived with you, in you, and believed in good faith that you, too, lived in me".

Thus, apparently, for the forty-two year old Multatuli there was no doubt that in his youth God had been a reality, worthy of love. An even clearer sign of his early religious conviction can be found in a letter from his bosom schoolfriend, Bram des Amorie van der Hoeven, written when Dekker gets married on the Isle of Java in 1846. Van der Hoeven is then chaplain in Utrecht and knows Dekker's former spiritual world as no one else, due to their former close relationship. On the base of that knowledge he writes to the twenty-six year old government official in the colonies: "After a century people still must talk about the good and great works you did. You must also work for higher interests, for our Christianity. To keep the East Indies for the Netherlands and to win them for Christ, is nowadays our most urgent need (...)"³ Undoubtedly the young chaplain sees in his friend Dekker nothing more or less than an ardent missionary amongst the heathens.

And it is certain that Dekker in those times expresses himself in his first literary experiments as an inspired Christian. Although in everyday life in the colonies he did not scorn earthly love, he knew very well that

the theory of love should look like this, especially when one writes poetry:

Wat zoekt ge, liefde en min? Mistrouw haar zoet genot:
Geen liefde is als van God, bestendig, rein, verheven,
Het stoffelijke is te zeer met ons bestaan doorweven,
Gij vindt beneden niet, wat slechts bestaat bij God.⁴

I translate these traditional but smooth verses prosaically like this: "What are you looking for, for love? Mistrust her sweet/delight: no love is as that of God, lasting, pure, sublime. Our earthly existence is too much determined by material things, you will not find down here, what exists only in God." This rendering is of course just amateurish, but there is an official translation of one of his early poems, because the writer included it in his autobiographical work, the famous Max Havelaar; so, apparently, he himself thought it to be characteristic of the convictions of his youth, which he verbalised like this, standing on top of a volcano in Indonesia:

'T is sweeter here to praise aloud one's Mother...
Prayer sounds more fair by mountainside and hill...
The heart ascends higher than it does yonder --
On mountains one is nearer to God's will!
Here he created temple-choirs and altar,
Where foot of man brings no impurity,
Here he makes to Himself the tempest for his psalter...
And rolling roars his thunder: Majesty!⁵

But if he, twenty-five years old, so clearly hears God's thunder talking to him, what influences could then have led him to become a freemason just nine years later and soon after that a member of the society of free-thinkers, of which he even becomes one of the most prominent propagandists?

The years between 1845 and 1855 must have been years of feverish development for the colonial civic servant; what happened to him personally must have set him thinking about Holland's role as a Christian nation in a heathen colony. In order to get a clearer view on that question, it is good to outline concisely which biographical facts could have influenced his convictions. As a young man of twenty-one, Dekker meets in Batavia a beautiful catholic girl, Caroline Versteegh, and falls in love with her. But she soon notifies him of the unshakeable standpoint of her father: should he want to have a slight chance of becoming engaged and of satisfying other obvious desires, he would have to convert to Catholicism. Dekker hesitates only briefly; the called-in Pastor Scholten has a fatherly influence on him and he is baptised a catholic on August 28th, 1841.

Alas...Caroline keeps on writing him cool notes and her father finally puts an end to the affair, stating in a letter that "their characters differ too much".⁶

It is generally accepted⁷ that, for Dekker's romantic heart, the fact that he in vain had taken the step toward the Roman Catholic Church, must have given him a feeling of frustration. From that moment this feeling kept on influencing his convictions about belief as professed in the church, although he will never in his work show as much bitterness and sarcasm against Catholicism as against Protestantism, which was the official church of the country that would do him so much injustice.

In following years, he starts reading much, even very much for the conditions in the East, where the few books were hard to get and to preserve. According to notes he made, he had read novels by Hugo and Balzac immediately after their appearance. His rational powers develop at the expense of his romantic feeling for nature, which before had led him to religion, especially on top of volcanoes. In 1845 he gets engaged to Tine van Wijnbergen, who is to be his first wife, and writes to her about his struggle between reason and sentiment; however, he does not yet admit that his recent critical analyses have had any influence upon his religious convictions. I quote from one of his renowned "engagement letters": "Oh, that wretched reason (...) With a tiny bit of reason one makes a farce out of the Revelations of John - with a tiny bit of feeling one grasps the whole idea of 'God', 'Christianity', 'Eternity'. So what is higher, fairer? Would an emotional human being with limited intellectual powers not come closer to the Creator than someone with the opposite qualities? (...) We feel the power of the Creator in Nature, but we do not understand, do not comprehend how a tree germinates from the seed. Which organ, therefore, is more exact, noble, perfect?"⁸

When Dekker is twenty-three, he already rules with almost absolute authority in a remote corner of the East Indies -- the West coast of Sumatra -- in a small out-of-the-way place, Natal. There he experiences how the "heathen" natives are often reliable and dedicated, and show highly developed ethical norms, while the Dutch authority, though based on Christian morals, can act mercilessly and cruelly, even towards himself. For instance, when out of carelessness a shortage in his government funds comes to light, it appears that Christianity and pettiness are only too compatible. Dekker was temporarily dismissed until the moment he was capable of refunding the deficit.

His first independent thoughts about church, Christianity and religion appear eloquently when in 1851 he writes a long letter from the Indies to his childhood friend Kruseman, who has in the meantime become a publisher in Haarlem. He considers it no longer possible to accept the christian creed, he says, because, if Christ had already existed and had reconciled humanity with God the Father, the Christian world would not be so terribly

ill-organized. I quote from that letter: "I am not a christian, but I believe that I highly respect Christianity. So highly that I refuse to give that name to something that I have not yet seen on earth. And that is - among others - why I deny the truth of the New Testament. Christ would have been on Earth in vain - if he had ever been there. I honour Him more by denying his presence, than by believing that he has worked in vain and, therefore, wrongly."⁹ Thus, Christ remains an inspiring example for the young romantic, a high standard by which he will permanently test his own and other people's behavior.

When in 1851 he prepares to go on a long European leave, he writes down a few thoughts that he wants to work out in peace. This document gives us, in its point by point enumeration of his society-assaulting ideas, a surprisingly clear view on his inner development¹⁰: "Every farmer a doctor in the arts" (a nice democratic idea that up till now nowhere has been successfully put into practice, as far as I know); "burning of the dead" (Multatuli was the first Dutchman who would let himself be cremated); "laziness is theft" -- amplified by "poverty is a crime ... either one committed by the poor man or by his neighbour"; "everybody educates his own children"; "taxes must be equal by inequality" (a formula that in its conciseness anticipates the principle of "equal ability to bear" to which all tax systems in the world have since been striving in vain); "women are human beings" (a highly revolutionary thought in those unemancipated days). Among these and similar social hand-grenades we also find a concise summary for himself of his religious conviction at that time; "New Religion. God is the Lord. People should serve him by loving nature which represents him. One's fellow-man is the principal part of that nature."

In fact, this dictum meant, in veiled terms, an abolition of religion embodied in the church and its replacement by the idea of loving one's neighbour based on a pantheistic view of the world: people should feel solidarity with their fellow-men because they share the same essence. Spontaneously Multatuli has arrived at the same conclusion as his compatriot Spinoza, two centuries earlier, when the latter wrote in his Theological-political treaty: "Piety and obedience to God exist only in love for one's fellow-man"¹¹. Later Multatuli will remove from this conviction the metaphysical basis; his thinking then develops into an "existentialist" humanism, deduced from the naked fact of our common existence on earth.

But his wife Tine could hardly follow him in that train of thought. To her their attitude toward the traditional belief was unclear. What were they exactly: catholic? protestant? baptist? unchurchly? unchristian? unbelieving? When the family, after his resignation in the Indies, wanders through Europe - often not even together, she asks him in a letter to write her what his profession of faith is. His answer is a brilliant parable of one page, in which all his literary gifts suddenly manifest themselves

very clearly; this is the first text of his hand that will be published, in -- of course -- De dageraad (Daybreak), the ephemeral paper of the Freethinkers movement.

Dekker's parable is about a father who leaves his children alone at home for some time and in order to keep them busy during that period, gives them the following riddle "What would he be doing during his absence?" The children, one by one, provide answers which are in accordance with their characters; for instance: "One of the children, who was wearing a blue jacket, said: - I know. Father has gone to the tailor to get a blue jacket made."¹² But the youngest child is too busy caring for a thrush that had broken its leg, to be able to participate in the guessing game. When the father returns this child says that it has no idea where he could have been, because his thoughts have been too full of the thrush that is just now getting better. "Good", says the father, "that is also what the sick widow was doing whom I was visiting." End of the parable.

The meaning is clear: the child that did not form a notion about the absent father acted instinctively in accordance with his intentions. In other words, the different religions form their image of God after their own views and pull each other's hair -- as the children in Multatuli's story do. But he who follows the impulse of his heart is "closest to the Father".

This turning away from the dogmatic religion and its ruling image of God is, of course, strongly fed by the writer's life experience. In 1856 he has come into conflict with the government machinery in the Dutch East Indies, and has handed in his resignation, because the Dutch administration did not enable him to protect the native population firmly enough against exploitation and oppression. When in 1860 he publishes his autobiographical report on these events, Max Havelaar, the book is praised everywhere as a work of art, but he gets neither real help, nor satisfaction or rehabilitation. Not even from the Church, that fulfils its missionary role in the colonies, so-called in the interest of the natives.

It is all the more striking for Douwes Dekker that he does receive moral and active support from the Freethinker movement. The atheistic chairman of "De Dageraad", d'Ablaing van Giessenburg, is his personal friend and also, for a few years, his publisher. When in 1865 Multatuli is completely broke, d'Ablaing even lets him use his attic, where a couple of free-thinking carpenters make a few inhabitable rooms. That same year he receives, after a speech to the organization, the famous golden pencil with the inscription: "To Multatuli -- Society De Dageraad, March 29th 1865". A token of mutual appreciation in the wake of the fierce paper war Dekker has fought against the Church and for Free Thought. And indeed, Multatuli has in the meantime developed into what a contemporary critic, Busken Huet, called "the virtuoso of sarcasm"¹³. And that sarcasm (born of disappointed

love¹⁴) is directed especially against the traditional Scripture and those who professionally preach it. Thus the writer introduces in Max Havelaar the boy Frits, son of Droogstoppel (Drystubble), who in his adolescent resistance against the doctrine imposed upon him by his father, asks the chaplain during confirmation class one painful question after the other: "Is my baby brother condemned to hell, because he died before he was baptized? What is the use of pigs in a country where pork is prohibited? What did they do with the inheritance of people who rose from the dead? Why does the devil still have so much power, if he has been beaten by Christ? What happens if, before a battle, the canons of both armies are blessed? Why is Jesus called a son of David, if Joseph, who really descended from David, is not his father? Where did Noah get a couple of polar bears for his ark? From where came those people who were not allowed to kill Cain?"¹⁵

To us this rationalistic bible criticism may seem innocent; nevertheless it is only too characteristic of Van Lennep, the first "editor" of Max Havelaar, that he considered these questions to be so improper that he struck out the passage; a censorship measure that apparently has worked through till the English edition of 1967!¹⁶

~~On the other hand~~ the "servants of the Word" who failed to take Havelaar's side in his conflict with the government are immortally ridiculed in the person of "parson Chatterbox"¹⁷. The best of it all is that this character is introduced in the book, described and quoted by an ardent admirer, who is supposed to have written the chapters set in Amsterdam. Thus in the text of the book Multatuli lets the ideas of the chaplain be enthusiastically admired, by which device the hidden criticism is left to the reader who sees through the irony. Yes, Chatterbox is ~~in the~~ text highly appreciated by Droogstoppel, because he knows how to explain why the Dutch -- justly -- become rich by the exploitation of the colonies, while the Javanese -- also very justly -- remain poor. This is the way Chatterbox puts it in a sermon: "Lo and behold, is there not much wealth in Holland? That is because we have the Faith. Are not battle, murder and sudden death the order of the day in France? That is because they are catholics. Are not the Javanese poor? They are heathens! The longer the Dutch have to do with the Javanese, the more wealth there will be here and the more poverty there will be there. It is God's will that it should be so! Isn't it clearly the finger of God, who makes the wicked labour to preserve the just? Isn't it a hint to get much produced over there and to stand firm in the true faith here? Isn't that why we're told to "work and pray", meaning that we should pray and have the work done by the black scum which doesn't know its 'Our Father'?"¹⁸

Multatuli, by the way, is the first to admit that this portrait of Chatterbox is a caricature. When a missionary chaplain, parson Francken, a few months after the publication of Max Havelaar protests in the name of

Christianity, the writer answers frankly that he has exaggerated and, therefore, lied in the description of Chatterbox. But then he justly asks this question: why doesn't the entire church protest, either against such abuse, as described by Multatuli, if it exists, or against the description of it, if it does not exist?¹⁹

In the same reply by Multatuli, published in a journal, another passage catches the eye, where the writer magnanimously states that from an ethical point of view he and the christian doctrine are not so far apart: "No, you kind-hearted Christians, I am not far away from you. How could I be far away from you... I who have described Havelaar who sacrificed himself, from you who have based your faith on the altar of a sublime self-sacrifice?"²⁰ It is characteristic that here the following parallel is professed openly: Christ has sacrificed himself for the good of humanity, and... Havelaar has made a comparable elevated sacrifice.

It is this parallel that will obsess him for the rest of his life. Usually we know little about the daily reflections and statements of writers from a historic period. What they wrote in their diaries is mostly semi-unconsciously meant to be published and, therefore, filtered; and their conversations with friends are generally lost. But about Multatuli's informal association with his nearest friends a rare document is at our disposal: the booklet From the life of Multatuli²¹, written shortly after his death by one of his (numerous) girlfriends, Marie Anderson. She looks at the writer with a mixture of critical distance and mollification that grants a high degree of reliability to many of her anecdotes. She tells us that Multatuli had gathered around him a group of young girls who were to help him in a revolutionary reformation of the world; he then says to Marie: "Jesus started with fishermen, I will start with girls."²² With their help he hopes first to become emperor of the Netherlands East Indies, and afterwards something like "Lord of the World" -- a significant term to someone who sees the parallel with Jesus in it. One day Marie is walking with Multatuli in a dark forest near Haarlem -- as such, a daring act of shocking behaviour for an unmarried girl; she writes later: "In that dark forest his eyes, otherwise so faded, shone, when he imagined himself to be some sort of Jesus and when he praised Him because of His fulmination against the Pharisees."²³

Yes, in that way Multatuli must have felt Jesus as his congenial spirit. He, too, had fiercely defended himself against the Chatterboxes of his time. At the end of the book the writer concludes that in her eyes Multatuli has gone through The Netherlands "in order to cast out devils". She must have been only half conscious of the fact that with the use of this terminology she joins her friend in his identification with Christ.

Often admirers of Multatuli's work observe that in tone and style too, he was inspired by the biblical example of Jesus. For one thing, he chooses

parables to propagate his ideas, as for instance his famous "Stories of Authority"²⁴ show. Among those is the parable in which he ridicules the phenomenon of advertising which makes people believe in absurd qualities of the merchandise. This is the story: an Oriental, Hassan, only succeeds in selling his dates when he buys a parrot, which he teaches to repeat all day: "The dates of Hassan are thrice as big as they are." Immediately his sales boom.

In addition, he often takes his choice of words and sentence structures from the elevated style of the old-fashioned bible translation in Holland. He did not for nothing choose as the device for his collection of Ideas:

"A sower went out to sow.

Jesus"²⁵

But the whole, often flashingly concise formulation of many of these "ideas" has also the meaningful and aphoristic qualities of biblical sayings: "He who is satisfied with his work has a reason to be dissatisfied with his satisfaction"; "He who says 'I would' twelve times, says a stupidity eleven times"; "Where have all those nice kids gone?"; "He who talks humbly about himself, gets angry if you believe him".²⁶ Characteristic in this context is Idea 57: "There is only one way to Heaven: Golgotha". Here again we catch Douwes Dekker using his most typical form of "imitatio Christi". More and more Multatuli looks at his own hardships and his expulsion by the well-off society, as a parallel to Christ's martyrdom and crucifixion. Even in the choice of his pseudonym, his pen-name, this thought finds its expression. He is "multa-tuli", he who has suffered much and who, thereby, adds force to his task of rescuing mankind.

In a speech in Nijmegen in 1879, of which a lengthy newspaper report has been saved²⁷, he claims to respect the character of Jesus very much. Jesus suffered for his striving toward the good. But he had one privilege: he died young. If his disciples, who wanted to do anything to present him impressively, had had more knowledge of men, they would have let him live longer, in order to give him the opportunity to suffer more. Multatuli as Jesus' rival has then just become 59... He considered his whole life of not being recognized as a reformer, of being ignored by the policy-makers, of enduring poverty and of having to write for a living, to be one of a real martyr.

When in 1861 Multatuli publishes the Love Letters²⁸, there appears in them a passage in verse, the well-known and most dramatic Cross tale²⁹: a colourful and touching description of the delighted reactions of the public that marches after an unnamed convict, who drags his cross through the streets on the way to Golgotha. Enthusiastically they call to each other -- and of course Multatuli despises them for that reason:

part
 Something beautiful is to be seen on Golgotha (...)
 That, by God, will be something nice this time!
 He appears to be young and has something in his eyes
 That indicates tenacity... look, there he sinks down...
 He yet seems to be weak... the cross is heavy...
 I told you he was not strong, Nathan,
 But still I think he is tenacious and will not
 Cheat on us like the other thief last time,
 Who had hung only half an hour, when his head
 Fell aside and he was gone! He did not utter
 One single word that rewarded us for our trouble.
 Were you there? (Hold little Miriam a little higher,
 Jochebed) Say, were you there, Nathan ben Daoud,
 When that thief robbed us for so much vain trouble?

In the first edition the parallel is not brought to the fore until the end, but later Multatuli comes back to it in so many words. He then says in Idea 446 that he has heard from his publisher that "some readers have complained about the irregular way my Ideas appear." Promptly Multatuli reproaches these "some readers" because they, just like the obtrusive Jews around Golgotha, avidly want to enjoy his martyrdom. Just like these people, Multatuli's readers are afraid that he will not talk enough on his cross. It's all right, he assures the impatient readers, "the man on the cross is tenacious and will speak from the cross, but do not demand nor expect that he will keep on talking for ever. Jesus did say only seven short phrases and then died. I assure you, 'some readers', that from time to time I find it difficult to give you stories, ^{which} that you for the greater part do not even understand, when my heart bleeds at the sight of my wife and children in need."³⁰

which
 In another Idea, Multatuli expressed his relationship to and admiration for Jesus in perhaps the purest and shortest way with all his undogmatic and subjective coloring: "Jesus is badly described in the Bible. He who does not feel that, is not Jesus' friend. In order to appreciate Jesus, one must throw away the Bible."³¹ "Jesus was not a Christian himself. And with that I do not mean that he was an Israelite"³². But his whole phenomenon of psychological and actual identification with the

Christ-figure would not be so important to the writer Multatuli, if his most fundamental message, his ultimate ethical opinions did not also coincide with the essence of the gospel. When Douwes Dekker calls Jesus "no Christian" in Idea 66, he means that he wants to clear the essence of Jesus' teaching of the religious connotation that does not belong to it. It is typical for Multatuli the romanticist that he craves for the fatherly God who would help mankind and would show it the right way; it is also characteristic that he refuses to believe in a God who would be responsible for all the injustice and suffering that he sees around himself.

Thus being torn apart and indecisive like a typical romantic, Multatuli writes in 1861 Het gebed van den Onwetende (The Prayer of the Ignorant), that will put such a strong stamp on the sceptical Christians of his generation. Already in its title the ambiguity in question reveals itself: after all the one who really is agnostic or an atheist will not pray. But the poem has shaken the belief in God of many a reader:

I don't know if we are created with a goal...
 Or just exist by chance. Whether a God or... Gods
 Amuse themselves because of our pains and scoff
 At the imperfection of our existence. If that's the case
 It would be terrible! Who is to blame
 That the weak are weak, the sick sick and the fools foolish?
 (...)

What others claim to know about that God...
 Is of no use to me... I do not understand him! I wonder
 Why He revealed Himself to others and not to me?
 Is one child closer to the Father than the other?
 If just one human being does not know that God,
 It will be slander to believe in such a God.
 The child who calls in vain his father does no harm,
 The father who permits his child to call in vain, acts cruelly
 And fairer is the creed there is no father,
 Than that he would not listen to his child!³³

What Multatuli (again following Spinoza) completely rejects is ethical conduct to which a God as a kind of bogeyman would force us:

I do not see what use a God can be, to separate
 The good from evil... Just the contrary! Those who do good
 In order to receive rewards from heaven, turn the good
 Into something evil, into trade... And he who shuns
 All evil actions out of fear to burn one day in hell,
 Acts... cowardly!

Therefore Multatuli belongs to those who found a typically romantic solution for their indecision. He was convinced that in the end the rejection of all false images of God would mean a liberation, as a result of which mankind would reach its true destination. Only then the divine spark which is working inside us, would lead us unto a truth of our own making. The human being, left to its own responsibility, will want to do anything but good. Or in Multatuli's own words: "It is our task to observe, to think, to apply... It is our task to strive for development. It is our task to find pleasure in all this... that is, in one word: our task is to be virtuous, because pleasure, understood in this light, is virtue."³⁴

That is why he ends The Prayer of the Ignorant with a flicker of this humanistically tinted hope:

Or were you sure, oh Father, that I would do
Your wish, even without knowing it? That I,
Unconscious of Your being, would serve You,
In accordance with your wish? Would that be true?

But the text ends with the famous ambivalent lament:

The father does not answer...Oh God, there is no God!

In this way Multatuli shows us the romantic indecision in optima forma. Reason had taught him there could not be a God; emotionally he longed for a God to be there; a God who would let him reach his essentially human destination on his own responsibility and out of his own free will. Or, as Dekker writes in a letter to Mimi, his second wife: "I do not believe that there is a God, but I dream of a good, wise, almighty being; and it always seemed to me as if he would ask me: how could you let it stay such a rotten mess? And I would say: how did you make it such a rotten mess? And he again: Indeed, I did it to find out if you could change it, it was a test."³⁵

"Come, come, there is a man being crucified!"

And it is up to us, posterity, to decide if Multatuli has indeed passed this test.

Notes

1. Paul van 't Veer, Het leven van Multatuli (Amsterdam 1979), p.34 etc.
2. Multatuli, Volledige Werken II, (Amsterdam 1951) p.523.
3. idem, IX, p.20.
4. Paul van 't Veer, o.c., p.88.
5. Multatuli, Max Havelaar or The coffee auctions of the Dutch Trading Company, translated by Roy Edwards (Leyden, London, New York 1967), p.120.
6. Paul van 't Veer, o.c., p.95.
7. P. Spigt, Keurig in de kontramine (Amsterdam 1975), p.32.
8. VW. VIII, p.475.
9. VW. IX, p.145.
10. VW. X, p.172 and 282.
11. Spinoza, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, caput 13.
12. VW. I, p.9.
13. C. Busken Huet, "De virtuoos van het sarkasme" in: Litt. Fantasien en Kritieken, deel II.
14. Garnt Stuiveling, "Multatuli's verhouding tot het Christendom" in: Ontmoeting 1954, p.139 etc.
15. VW. I, p.228.
16. see note 5.
17. Named 'Blatherer' in the English edition of 1967.
18. Max Havelaar, English edition, p.251.
19. P. Spigt, o.c. p.36.
20. VW. I, p.385.
21. Marie Anderson, Uit Multatuli's leven (Utrecht 1981).
22. idem, p.50.
23. idem, p 72.
24. VW. II, p.34 etc.
25. VW. II, p.311.
26. VW. II, p.311-320.
27. P. Spigt, o.c., p.176.
28. Minnebrieven, VW. II, 11-160.
29. VW. II, p.106-114.
30. Idee 446. VW. II, p.654.
31. Idee 65. VW. II, p.320.
32. Idee 66. VW. II, p.321.
33. VW. I, p.475-477.
34. Idee 177. VW. II, p.393.
35. VW. XI, p.170.