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Margriet van Essen-van Haeften and Elisabeth Maria Post: Two literary ladies of the Dutch Enlightenment

On December 18, 1776, the Dutch poet Hieronymus van Alphen wrote a stern letter to the Swiss Protestant minister Lavater, in which he criticized the condescending description that the clergyman-writer from Zürich had made about the shadow portrait of the famous Dutch admiral Michiel de Ruyter. This Johann Kaspar Lavater was the guru of Physiognomy, or the art of judging human character from facial features, which he had described in his *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-78). The idea behind this pseudo-science is the biblical assertion that God created Man in his Image. Adam must have been beautiful before original sin, and Christ had of course an ideal portrait. Lavater thought to improve human interaction with his interpretations; his study's full title reads "Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe" - to promote human knowledge and love. People sent him shadow portraits and he gave his opinion about their character, based on their silhouettes. Many contemporaries believed that the relation between body and soul might have its similarities in the outer and inner parts of the body. Likewise, the resemblances between human and animal characteristics might also have their reflections in their inner worlds. We can judge from some of his examples and their animal equivalents. The Ox's head is "a brusque, inhumane, pitiless, cruel, plump, dumb, grumpy and headstrong creature, a real zealot, always following his head, obstinate and immobile (...) when this head is observed in someone's youth it tends to a calf-like being."

These ideas may look and sound silly to us nowadays, but there was a wide following in the German lands (Goethe showed interest) and there was a special Lavater circle in the Netherlands. The leading person here was a baroness in Gelderland called Margriet van Essen-van Haeften. She corresponded with Lavater and translated some of his poetry under the title *Nadenken over mijzelven* (Thinking about myself). He wrote her a wedding poem and the Dutch translation of Lavater's work *Over de Physiognomie* was dedicated to Margriet van Essen. She was the protégé of the mega-publisher Johannes Allart; she was not a major player in the Dutch literary scene of the late 18th century, but she had money and many contacts. I was reacquainted with her while researching Allart, a project which turned out to be partly a nostalgic trip back to my graduate studies in Amsterdam, when I and a group of undergraduates researched the life and works of this lady of the landed gentry. She was born Margriet van Haeften on January 14, 1751 in Utrecht and married in 1774 Lucas Willem van Essen. Both were of noble birth and possessed vast amounts of land and titles. They settled in his family mansion, a very luxurious estate known as De Schaffelaar in Barneveld. Because of his wealthy possessions, he was a so-called 'ambtsjonker', a squire; he was in charge of the municipality and a representative to the provincial government.

This couple of stature had many friends and they formed a small literary circle. Ahasverus

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van den Berg, W.H. Sels and the well-known physico-theologian J.F. Martinet were regulars in this provincial salon, where religious contemplation prevailed. Margriet dabbled also in national literary circles, as we find her invited as honorary member on September 23, 1774 to an important literary society called '*Kunstliefde spaart geen Vlijt*' (Love of Art spares no Diligence). We smile perhaps at the titles of these societies, such as *Kunst wordt door Arbeid verkregen* (Art is acquired through Labor), *Kunst voedt 's menschen Geluk* (Art feeds human happiness), *Al oeffenende vordert men* (Practice makes progress), *Vlijt kweekt Kunst* (Diligence breeds Art), or *Volmaakter door den Tijd* (More perfect through Time). Still, they were an important part of literary life, and many well known authors were members. These societies were not limited to Holland; we know of one in Batavia in the East Indies, and one in Suriname. This form of sociability - and Dutch cultural life still has a strong tendency to club behavior - also had strong opponents who scoffed at the dictatorial opinion of the multitude versus the poetics of the individual. However, many of them thrived in patriotic times and a few survived into the 19th century. The *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Society for Dutch Literature) still exists. It was remarkable that in those days members had equal rights, as in a democracy, and, also importantly, women took part.

Margriet van Essen had two of her poems '*Hervatte Moed*' (Regained Courage) and '*De Heere Regeert*' (The Lord Rules) published in '*Proeven van Poëtische Mengelstoffen*' (Samples of Poetic Miscellany). Another one, '*To the Angels*,' was refused for theological reasons: the

Dutch Reformed poetical mind was probably not too keen on angels. She published her first work of poetry entitled '*Iets van M-*' (Something by M--) in 1780, followed a year later by a work in prose '*Eene handvol Menschenvreugde*' (A Handful of Human Joy).

She had no children, but they adopted a son in 1790; her husband Lucas died a year later. When she herself died in 1793, at age 42, she left many friends to mourn her, as witnessed by the numerous poems added to the posthumous reprint of '*Iets van M-*'.

How should we characterize her limited oeuvre? How do we experience the sentiments that she expresses? Her strong religious devotion is definitely one of the first thoughts that come to mind, as well as her modest demeanor: not using her full name, others published her work, one posthumously. Her unbridled sentiment guides her writing about love, mostly in a religious package, friendship, nature and death, characteristically enhanced with repetitions, exclamation marks and an abundance of dashes. They may give both a curious and a dated impression. I am afraid that to modern ears, her poetry is one of limited quality. She wrote many poems for birthdays, weddings, funerals etc. and they make a sympathetic impression because of their almost apologetic unpretentiousness. I believe that Margriet herself would have preferred a reunion with her husband in paradise to recognition as a well-known poet. Her husband had a lingering illness, died at the age of 52 and was the subject of several considerable birthday poems. To quote from one of them : "En - nu, mijn vreugd! Och leef verheugt! Hoop

vroeg en spaa Op Gods gena.- Kom! Hand aan hand, Naar 't Vaderland!- Den Heer gediend, Dien besten vriend! Met hart en zin, Vol zuivre min!- Gij toebereid Voor de Eeuwigheid! Gij - oud! en grijs; Gij - goed, en wijs, Als Jezus prijs, in 't Paradijs!!! Ik kan niet meer!" (And - now my joy! Oh! live in joy! Hope early and late For God's Grace.- Come! Hand to hand, To the Fatherland!- Served the Lord, That best Friend! With Heart and Soul, Full of pure love!- Thou prepared for Eternity! Thou!- old! and grey; Thou! - good, and wise, Like Jesus praise, In Paradise!!! I can no more!) There are fifteen exclamation marks in this short passage, and they seem to cover for her inability to use the appropriate emotive words. However, in a friendly letter to her publisher Allart, I found that there are just as many. I believe that out of sheer enthusiasm she just loved to sprinkle her texts with these marks.

Margriet leans heavily on German contemporaries like Klopstock, who is quoted verbatim, and Kleist and Gellert. It is slightly disappointing to realize that her prose in *A Handful of Human Joy* is borrowed from a German precursor, C.F. Sintenis (1750-1820), a minor poet on the German literary scene. Only two of the nine chapters are completely her own. There is a chapter on Physiognomy in which she expresses a desire to meet George Washington, as one of the fighters for freedom. In another poem she shows her support for the Dutch patriots, who were pro-American during the age of revolution.

I am not sure whether it was her money, her social standing as a baroness, her friendship with the publisher Allart, or her literary judgment that made her popular. Her works did not reach bestseller status: they were still available as remainders for

a few cents in 1816. In any case, around 1786 she received a letter from poet Ahasveer van den Berg about a young and upcoming writer called Elisabeth Maria Post. Johannes Allart, who had a fine nose for publicity, had requested to publish it as a blurb to advertise a new literary work. The introduction to this novel, *Het Land* (The Countryside), promotes the work as one of those "that one calls nowadays 'sentimental'." However, says van den Berg, "the endearing sensitive part of it is not found in its exclamation marks, dashes, tender, clear sounding words." This may come as a surprise in light of what we just heard from Margriet's own works, which were full of these diacritical signs. Van den Berg continues: "My friend (Ms. Post) speaks in the regular civilized language of ordinary life. She pleases and moves us, not by vain sounds, but by natural and simple descriptions of striking matters and truths." Who was this woman who "possesses a very strong memory, a very quick intellect, a very lively mind and a very fine pure taste", according to van den Berg?

Although born in the same city, Utrecht, on November 26, 1755, and later residing in the same countryside in Gelderland, Elisabeth Maria Post was in many ways the opposite of Margriet van Essen. Her family was in financial troubles in her childhood, had no blue blood, and for a long time she lived as a single writing woman, not unlike Jane Austen. She published her epistolary novel *Het Land* (The Countryside) in 1788, a collection of poetry and short prose called *Voor Eenzamen* (For Lonely People) in 1789, followed by *Reinhart of Natuur en Godsdienst* (Reinhart or Nature and Religion) a novel in three volumes in 1791-92. As reaction to her mother's death she writes *Mijne*

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Kinderlijke Tranen (My childlike Tears) in 1792. *Gezangender Liefde* (Love Songs) of 1794 describes her feelings of love, which she had recently found, when she married vicar van Overdorp. In 1796 she expresses *Het Waare Genot des Levens* (True Joy of Life) and her last poetical work is published in 1807 entitled *Ontwaakte Zanglust* (Awakened Joy of Singing). That same year she moved back to the quiet countryside in Gelderland, where she died five years later in 1812.

When Brandt Corstius described her life and work, he called it *Idylle en Realiteit*. Idyllic are her expressions of friendly emotions, and perceptions of religion and nature. She finds reality in her own falling in love at age 39, and the many problems that her brother encounters as a planter in the West Indies. He becomes Reinhart or Pure-heart in the novel of that name, and the author, who probably had shares in her brother's plantation, struggles with the problem of slavery. As Paasman has written: "(Reinhart's) faith supports the acceptance of slavery. Divine Providence itself has determined the fate of individuals and nations, and therefore it is also Providence which brought negroes into slavery." Few Dutch literary works dealt with slavery and then only to advocate being a good master who does not abuse his slaves, but encourages them to become good Christians. The story in *Reinhart* depicts the main character's travails in several parts. In the first part, "The Sea," he ponders past and present under God's guidance. Book two, "Guyana," describes his first experiences, his work with slaves and the opportunity to start his own enterprise. His Robinson Crusoe-like existence on his plantation L'heureuse Solitude is the next part, after which follows his falling in love with the

daughter of another planter. Idyllic life with two children is disrupted by harvest failures and his own illness. Although recovered, he loses his wife and decides to return to Holland for the sake of the children's education. His negro slaves cry when they see their good master leave. The experiment in the tropics has not been a great success.

The novel did not change slavery in Holland, but added perhaps a social component to the organized world vision that was so dominant in the 18th century. The great chain of being was the system that explained the order in nature and the fixed position that human beings were in. Post's novel promotes decent behavior, but receives nowadays more often praise for its descriptions of nature in the tropics than a change in colonial attitudes.

Nature in the Netherlands and its emotional and religious impact are the subjects of Post's other novel *Het Land* (The countryside). Emilia corresponds with Euphrosyne about their friendship and the preference of life in the city over the countryside. Written with a lot of empathy for the local day laborer and their agricultural families, it does not surprise us that she chooses quiet nature which comes closer to heavenly desires, over busy city sentiments. We find a similar opinion in the works of J. F. Martinet, author of *Katechismus der Natuur*.

We have not found any record of an actual meeting between Elisabeth Maria Post and Margriet van Essen-van Haefden. Although of different social classes, both lived in the Dutch countryside of Gelderland, had mutual friends, and had the same publisher. They also seemed to have a certain

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modesty in common, although that might have been learned behavior of the period. The eighteenth century is not yet completely put on the map as far as women writers are concerned. Certainly at the end of the century, the literary scene had changed, one did not need to know Latin any more to become a poet, and the novel had shed its bad name and become an acceptable form of representing life. It developed into an educational tool to uplift and advise people about ethical problems in virtuous love, married life and family. Sentiments were allowed and could be a moral compass of virtue. The word 'sentimental' itself may have more negative connotations nowadays, but, as studies have shown, deserves more understanding. I read it as a reasonable attitude in a religious person in the works of these two authors. Because of this subject matter it may be no coincidence that more women became part of the literary scene. There was also a practical side. Margriet van Essen had a room of her own, was not a woman who needed any money from her books, had her little circle of friends and her connections made her popular. E. M. Post won her popularity through her works: her first novel had five reprints in one year and was even translated into German.

One may well ask: Do we have to remember these writers or are they merely footnotes of literary history? I do not think they need an immense revival as unjustly forgotten geniuses. They do, however, deserve occasional attention to compensate for our failure to use the fine brushes of history that paint the literary landscape. They were women in their own right, representative of a period when women did not get their fair share. Perhaps extra-literary movements have not gotten their fair share either

in literary appreciation. Religious mysticism, physico-theology, stargazing, physiognomy, anti-slavery sentiments and other movements are just a few snapshots of the late 18th century. The bad rap that the word Enlightenment has received lately, as if it only encompasses a rigid rationality, should be laughed at by anyone who informs him- or herself with a few basic examples of the period. They may be surprised to find the similarities with modern times.

NOTES

¹ In Buijnsters, p.88; see also chapter III, paragraph 4: "mijn vriend Lavater."

² The illustration of this figure is reproduced in CHL 6, p.54a.

³ Most information about van Essen-van Haeften comes from Paasman 1981.

⁴ For these societies, see de Vries and Singeling.

⁵ Margriet writes about her own involvement: "Zij hielp hem den zwaren last van groote ongemakken in zijn lichaam, waarmede hij doorgaands worstelde" (*Iets van M-*, p.G2).

⁶ Letter to Johannes Allart, 24 November [1786], manuscript in the Royal Library, The Hague.

⁷ Allart was Holland's foremost publisher at the end of the 18th century, not least for his aggressive sales techniques and his astute business acumen. Cf. Broos 1979 and 1981.

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⁸ Cf. Brandt Corstius, Broos 1979, and Paasman 1973 for extensive biographical and bibliographical information.

⁹ Paasman 1984, p.221.

¹⁰ Schenkeveld's *Met en zonder Lauwerkrans* is a fine reference work, although Margriet van Essen – van Haeften's home is called Hasselaar instead of Schaffelaar (p.685).

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