

A ‘Farewell to Literature’ in 1860?: The Problem of Literariness in the Work of Multatuli (1820–1887)¹

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Today, Multatuli (1820-1887) is considered as one of the most important Dutch writers. His stance towards literature, however, was highly ambivalent. At the one hand, he realised that writing fiction was the best way to gain personal and political attention. At the same time, he highly mistrusted the instrument of (sentimental) fiction to engage readers. The same ambivalence dominates his presentation as a writer: Multatuli mythologized himself, but he also argued for a sincere, ‘authentic’ writership. In my presentation, I want to analyze these seemingly contradictory ideas about fictionalizing the world and the self. Some concepts in literary sociology, such as ‘posture’ (Jérôme Meizoz) or ‘the double life of writers’ (Bernard Lahire) help to understand the logic of Multatuli’s ideas about fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, Richard Lansdown defended the ‘autonomy of literature’ in a book with that very title. He investigated whether literature ‘possesses or preserves “its own activity” amidst the institutional influences to which it is unquestionably subject’. This term institutionalism is understood by Lansdown in a rather broad sense: according to institutionalists, ‘literature is itself no more than one institution among many others and, like all other institutions, it is ultimately shaped as a cultural product by the socio-political and ideological forces to which it is subjected.’²

Lansdown is not the only scholar who has been concerned with ‘literariness’ in the last 10 or 15 years. It is clear that the question ‘What is literature?’ (with its double connotation of ‘what is it?’ and ‘what is its place in society?’) has become more and more difficult to answer. Among the many forces that have contributed to this development, the rise of Cultural Studies is definitely one of the most important ones. In the last decades, the meaning of the word ‘culture’ thoroughly changed under the influence of both Cultural Studies and Cultural History. Not only has ‘traditional’ literature lost much of its autonomy in its many modern representations (graphic literature, poetry slam and rap, digital literature...), the written word is also no longer a privileged genre for understanding contemporary culture. Not surprisingly, this leads critics to sounding the alarm by emphasizing the humanizing value and democratic importance of both literature and literary criticism. A well-known example is Derek Attridge’s *The singularity of literature*, in which he emphasized literature’s ethical role.³

An interesting book in this recent critical tradition is William Marx’s *L’adieu à la littérature* [A farewell to literature] from 2005. Marx does not blame modern media from causing a crisis in literature, but he analyzes how writers and critics from the late eighteenth century onwards have complicated the theme of literature’s meaning themselves. They idealized the work of art as an enigmatic, autonomous object which in the end has no role to play in society. This vision alienated readers from literary texts and would in the end urge them to bid farewell to literature.

If Marx’ storyline sounds convincing as far as highbrow literature is concerned, it is less applicable to the middlebrow and lowbrow literary traditions. It also seems to fit the French and German literary histories better than the American or Dutch ones. In this paper, I want to demonstrate this by discussing the nineteenth-century Dutch writer Multatuli (1820-1887) and his (anti-)colonial novel *Max Havelaar*. Multatuli can be regarded as both an example and a counterexample of Marx’s thesis. In his case, one could speak of a ‘farewell to literature’ as well, but it is a different one than in the cases of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, or Valéry. Multatuli does not idealize literature, he does the opposite: he denounces it as an insincere way of describing the world. However, the critical responses to *Max Havelaar* show that precisely the ‘literariness’ of the novel contributed to its popularity and long-lasting influence.

MARX’S L’ADIEU À LA LITTÉRATURE

Let me first summarize Marx’s argument in slightly greater detail. He discusses the period between 1700 and 2000, in which literature, according to him, faced three different periods: a period of expansion, one of autonomization, and finally one of devaluation. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literature grew into a highly valued medium to understand the world. In the intellectual scene in Europe, in which religion became less and less important, literature presented itself as a new ‘religion’ to give meaning to life. This far-

² Lansdown 2001, p. 17 and p. 6.

³ Attridge 2004.

fetched idea about literature stimulated the dogma of art for art's sake from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Literature was expected to substitute the world.

Marx makes clear that this growing autonomization would in the end destroy the high value of literature and literariness. When literature started to distract itself ever more from mimesis, it started to make itself superfluous. With the avant-gardes in the twentieth century, writers finally 'forbade' themselves to represent the world. Literature's autonomy was complete, but ironically enough, this also made that its devaluation could no longer be denied. For the reading public and the culture at large, literature no longer had any relevance.

Many aspects of Marx's much-discussed book could easily be contradicted. One could say, for example, that Marx only discusses 'high literature', which has been produced in a few large European countries. The book is about the German Romantic writers, Hegel, Flaubert and Baudelaire, dandyism, the historical avant-garde and the French OuLiPo movement. It is not about nationalist literature, occasional literature, religious literature and all these other forms of popular texts, which have been so influential in large parts of Europe during the last three centuries. But let us now focus on Marx's analysis of high literature. It seems to me that that part of his critique is largely valid. It is to some extent related to the ideas about literature which have been developed by literary sociologists in the last two decades. Pierre Bourdieu, to name only the most influential one, also thinks that French authors like Flaubert and Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century take a decisive step towards literature's autonomy.⁴

But both Bourdieu and Marx seem to forget that the situation in France in the 1850s and 1860s was far from archetypical. At the same time when a few important French writers invented art for art's sake, British and American writers aimed at writing sentimentalist fiction which was far from autonomous. The Dutch writer Eduard Douwes Dekker, who wrote under the pseudonym of Multatuli, can be related to this sentimentalist tradition.

MULTATULI'S MAX HAVELAAR AND THE NOVEL FORM

In 1860, when Eduard Douwes Dekker made his debut as a novel writer under the name of Multatuli, he definitely was not interested in art for art's sake. He seems to have had no 'artistic' reasons to publish his first novel *Max Havelaar*, but two distinct political reasons.⁵

Firstly, he wanted to defend the rights of the people in the Dutch Indies, which was a Dutch colonial area at that time. Douwes Dekker worked as a civil servant on Java, but decided to quit his job when he saw that his actions to stop the exploitation of the Javanese people were without any effects. This is closely related to his second reason to publish the book; he hoped to receive rehabilitation and present himself as a martyr for the Javanese cause. His pseudonym is obviously closely related to these goals; it is a Latin phrase, which means something like 'I have suffered much', or more literally, 'I have borne much'.

In 1859, when he had just finished the manuscript of *Max Havelaar*, he tried to blackmail a few influential politicians with it. Knowing that his controversial publication could be dangerous for continuation of the Dutch politics in the Indies, Multatuli promised to keep the book unpublished when he would gain a high political position. After this plan failed, he adopted the pen name of Multatuli and started to work as a professional writer for the rest of his life.

It is interesting that Multatuli seemed to think that a career as a politician was more or less exchangeable for a career as a writer. In 1860, he clearly considered writing literature as a very influential political act. He also seemed to think that moving his audience emotionally by

⁴ See for instance his pioneering article Bourdieu 1985 and his most extensive text on literature and autonomy, Bourdieu 1996.

⁵ For more information about Douwes Dekker's case, see Beekman 1996 and Pieterse 2010.

sentimentalist stories was a good way of involving them in his political cause. In that respect, he was inspired by the sentimental tradition of American writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's important and effective novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852, only eight years before Multatuli's book. It is clear that he knew *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because he referred to it somewhere in *Max Havelaar*. The narrator has told the readers the tragic story of the fictional characters Saijah and Adinda and then goes on by reflecting on the use of stories to draw people's attention to social abuses:

O that I were summoned to substantiate what I have written! O that people would say: 'You have invented this SAIJAH... he never sang that song... no ADINDA ever lived at Badur!' [...]

[M]ay one deny the truth which underlies *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because LITTLE EVA never existed? Shall it be said to the authoress of that immortal plea – immortal not on account of art or talent, but because of its purpose and the impression it makes – shall it be said to her: 'You have lied, the slaves are not ill-treated, for... not all of your book is true: it's a novel!?' [...] Is it her fault – or mine – that truth, in order to find an entrance, so often has to borrow the guise of a lie?⁶

This metafictional extract, in which Multatuli analyzes the fictional story he has just presented to the reader, is typical for *Max Havelaar* and for the rest of Multatuli's oeuvre. In a way, this technique is conventional for every pragmatic kind of literature. Compare the earlier quote with this short extract from the concluding chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself:

The writer has often been inquired of, by correspondents from different parts of the country, whether this narrative is a true one; and to these inquiries she will give one general answer.

The separate incidents that compose the narrative are, to a very great extent, authentic, occurring, many of them, either under her own observation, or that of her personal friends. She or her friends have observed characters the counterpart of almost all that are here introduced; and many of the sayings are word for word as heard herself, or reported to her.⁷

There are two major differences between Multatuli and Stowe, though. Firstly, *Max Havelaar* is far more complex than its American counterpart. Multatuli integrates several different narrative layers and a few different narrators in his book. It is also stylistically more exuberant and richer in its rhetoric. Secondly and even more importantly, a major difference between Stowe and Multatuli is that the latter fundamentally mistrusts fiction as a way to reveal the world. For him, fictional stories can be only a means to the larger end of revealing the Truth – the capital T is Multatuli's. Therefore, fiction must be unmasked as mere fiction in the end, so that this Truth can present itself. This is exactly what the writer tries to do in the concluding part of *Max Havelaar*. Multatuli there breaks into the story, pushes the fictional characters off-stage and reveals his aims:

Yes, I, Multatuli, 'who have borne much', take up the pen. I make no apology for the form of my book. That form seemed suitable to me for the attainment of my object. [...]

I want to be read!

[...]

⁶ Multatuli 1987, p. 278-279.

⁷ Beecher Stowe 1852, part 2, p. 310.

When this object is attained, I shall be satisfied. For it was not my intention to write well... I wanted to write in such a way as to be heard.⁸

Of course, we are not expected to believe Multatuli's statement that he did not intend to write well – in reality, the novel has a keen rhetorical structure. However, this statement fits Multatuli's hope that his novel in the end will be read for its message, not for its pleasantly well-written scenes, its irony or its play with several narrators. All these devices were just sugarcoating the underlying bitter Truth, as he wrote in a letter to his wife in 1859 while finishing the novel.⁹

In the international discussion on Max Havelaar, the reasons for Multatuli for writing a novel instead of a brochure were often discussed. Many older articles and books claim that the brilliant literary form was indeed mainly an instrument for effectively spreading the truth, like I wrote earlier.¹⁰ However, some modern researchers have justifiably defended the thesis that Multatuli's literary choices worked in a far more complex way. They claim, for instance, that writing a novel with a multifaceted, many-voiced character provided Multatuli with a unique insight in the colonial problematic.¹¹ I think that both positions can exist, next to each other. Whereas the former closely follows the poetical statements of Multatuli himself in 1859 and after, the latter is inspired by twentieth-century theoretical insights by Mikhail Bakhtin and others and is largely concerned with the effects of the novel form, not with Multatuli's intentions.

If Eduard Douwes Dekker tried to reveal his Truth unambiguously in a written form, he better wrote a brochure. His book has had great importance in both Dutch and international debates on (post)colonialism, but never in an uncomplicated manner. Within a year after publication heated discussions followed, first in relatively small circles of politicians and high intellectuals, but after a few decades in large parts of society. Max Havelaar grew into one of the most discussed and most important Dutch novels ever, as provocative in 1860 as in 2010, when its 150th anniversary was commemorated.

Not only the political 'message', but also Douwes Dekkers' rehabilitation got complicated because of the novel form. Writing up the words 'I, Multatuli, take up the pen' can be regarded as a performative act: it brought the persona of Multatuli into being, a figure which must be clearly distinguished from the biographical person of Eduard Douwes Dekker.¹² Douwes Dekker did maintain this pseudonym later in his writing career; he also seemed to be posing as the self-confident and mighty genius Multatuli on a picture from 1862 (see below). This posture made him on the one hand a highly popular idol (for readers, for feminist, socialists and other groups) and on the other hand a highly controversial, mistrusted figure (for more conservative readers in the nineteenth century).

⁸ Multatuli 1987, p. 318.

⁹ Multatuli 1960, p. 67: 'Eigenlijk is het een beroep op het publiek. Maar daar niemand zich de moeite geeft om officiële corresp: te lezen, moet mijn boek het voertuig zijn waarop die wordt ingegeven als een drankje zoodat het nu al het aantrekkelijke heeft van een roman om dan eerst gaandeweg te hooren dat dit alles waar gebeurd is.' [*In fact, it is an appeal to the audience. But because nobody will bother reading the official correspondence, my book must be the vehicle for 'swallowing' it like a drink; so it has all the attracting features of a novel now while it becomes gradually clear that everything really happened.*] (italics in text)

¹⁰ See for instance Sötemann 1966; unfortunately, there are no examples of this analysis in English.

¹¹ See for instance Beekman 1996 and Wirth 2010.

¹² See Meizoz 2007 for his ideas about authorial posture. For an English article: Meizoz 2010.



Multatuli in 1862.

CONCLUSION

In *L'adieu à la littérature*, William Marx gives a sketch of the trajectory modern literature chooses from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards: literature grew from a respected and important to an enigmatic and largely irrelevant practice. The case of Multatuli, however, shows us a different picture. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when French literature slowly 'autonomized' in the works of Flaubert and Baudelaire, Multatuli followed the American tradition of sentimental literature. In this tradition, literature was mainly a means to a larger end of engaging and convincing the reader. Multatuli mixed his sentimental political message with innovative literary instruments, by which he proved how a political debate can be initiated and complicated by a novel.

There are many more examples of critical novels, which have complicated political issues in a similar way: from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, from Fjodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. In the recent discussion about literariness and the influence of literature in the public sphere, the discomfiting and complicating contribution of these books needs to be taken into account. If literature has "its own activity" amidst institutional influences, as Richard Lansdown calls it, it can be best observed in works of literature like these.

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