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De buik van de lezer

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SUMMARY

In this thesis, the Dutch author Multatuli (pseudonym for Eduard Douwes Dekker, 1820-1887) plays the leading role. The focus is particularly on his seven collections of *Ideën*, published between 1862 and 1877. This experimental work cannot be described using only existing genre definitions, first of all because his *Ideën* have no coordinating organising principle. In addition, the text is reflexive; the writer constantly comments on his manner of writing. Another striking feature is the use of a large quantity of quotes, parodies, allusions, imitations, figures of speech and genres. Many *Ideën* also take an aphoristic or fragmented shape. But most remarkable is the performance of readers in *Ideën*: our role is under constant discussion.

This dissertation studies how the metaphysical opposition between presence and absence in the *Ideën* is both constructed and becomes disordered. Four components of Multatuli's manner of thinking have been mapped: 'I', 'nature', 'history' and 'literature'. For each separate component, the extent to which the *Ideën* can be indicated as reliant on a metaphysical logic and the extent to which the *Ideën* can be read as a text in which logic is disrupted, are studied.

First, the circumstances under which the *Ideën* came into being are discussed. The thread in this chapter is Multatuli's quest for a new way to step into the limelight. When Multatuli positions himself in the public space, a similar kind of ambiguity and paradoxality as is shown in his work is observed.

The concept of individualism, the 'I', is examined further in chapter 3. The author Multatuli positions himself as a 'proud' *me* in relation to the reader, and, like Rousseau, puts a strong emphasis on his inner and external unity, his courage to be himself and refusal to shroud himself in false humility. However, despite the fact that writing for the audience enables the 'I' to show itself to the world, making an intimate thought public also threatens the original unity. The writer becomes alienated from his spontaneous emotions if he has to sell them to the audience. In the *Ideën*, this estrangement from oneself is thematised using intertextual references. Multatuli refers to texts which, in turn, are connected to the concept of self-reflexivity. By means of Derrida's concepts about the place of reflection in Western culture, this chapter results in a second alternative interpretation of the 'I' in the *Ideën*.

Chapter four discusses Multatuli's concepts about 'Nature'; I will prove

that where this subject is concerned, Multatuli's manner of thinking runs analogously with Rousseau's also, because both put pursuing unity and combating halfness first. According to Multatuli, studying Nature has a healing effect on human beings who have been made sick through their belief in theological oddities. I specifically deal with the way in which Multatuli operates the concept of 'Nature' in two discussions: the one concerning the collision between natural science and the Christian world view and in the debate about the suppression of women and their sexual desires. In both discussions, scriptural passages and Bible exegesis play a central role: I will demonstrate how Multatuli dealt with both in a critical manner.

Still, Nature not only promotes mental health and the pursuit of unity because it is also responsible for death, decay and dissection. If Multatuli typifies Nature, he indicates that there are always two forces that affect each other unfavourably: the one force pursues unity, while the other divides and dissects. The eternal battle between these forces makes it impossible to fathom the truth entirely: the process of thinking itself is influenced by these two forces. On this point, Multatuli's thought corresponds to that of Empedokles, Nietzsche and Freud; thinkers on who Kofman and Derrida later based their concept of 'double logic'. In this part of chapter four, the Bible (in particular the book of Genesis) is of major importance; I will show how Multatuli gave an entirely personal interpretation to the Creation story through this cosmology.

Chapter five discusses the concept of 'history'. In 19th-century historiography, the notion dominated that the introduction of the Scriptures was to be considered the beginning of Western civilisation. Multatuli, however, considers the Scriptures' dominance of oral speech to be a negative historic occurrence. From the introduction of the Scriptures, Multatuli believes that a fatal alienation of man from his own inner self occurs – again, Rousseau has the same point of view.

With *Woutertje Pieterse*, Multatuli wrote a history himself. This 'alternative' historiography by Multatuli proves that not only the dominance of the Scriptures is an important historic event; the introduction of bourgeois notions such as frugality, obligation and work are important also. The chapter is concluded with an excursion to *Max Havelaar*: the concepts of extravagance and frugality, as elaborated in the chapter, will be used in a new lecture on this work.

In chapter six, that deals with Multatuli's view on literature, I once more deal with the crucial role literature has to fulfil in the previous chapters, because at the end of these chapters, ambiguity appeared after literature was involved. In this chapter, the double action of literature is described again and in more in detail, this time with an emphasis on the reader's role. I focus on the 'belly', because Multatuli relates reading literature and the belly in various ways. First, the belly is the location of the stomach: Multatuli logically

compared reading novels with digesting food and not with an exalted and pure mental activity. Secondly, the belly is connected to the abdomen and womb and Multatuli connects reading literature to fertility, eroticism and sensuality. Finally, the operation of literature is elucidated by means of the concept of 'belly speech' (ventriloquism): readers confuse what originates from the book and that which originates from their own 'belly'.