

Occasional Writer, Sensational Writer: Multatuli as a Sentimental Benevolence Writer in the 1860s¹

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Introduction

In 2007, Darren C. Zook published a surprising article about Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860). According to Zook, this centrepiece of the Dutch literary canon is a little overrated. Too often, Dutch readers have regarded *Max Havelaar*, the writer's debut novel, as a wonderfully modern book which defends progressive political ideas. Zook states: "Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* was not an anti-colonial text and [...] its stylistic innovations were not radically new and did not single-handedly invent Dutch literary modernity."² Admittedly, for many non-professional Dutch readers Multatuli (1820–1887) is *the* anti-colonial writer, although this interpretation may be based as much on the fact that a fair trade company adopted the name "Max Havelaar" in the 1980s as on his novels. Many important non-Dutch readers have defended an "anti-colonial" reading too: Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, even Vladimir Lenin.³ However, when Zook claimed that a revisionist reading of Multatuli's works was never attempted, he certainly was wrong.⁴ The Dutch novelist Willem Frederik Hermans, to name but one influential reader, wrote in his 1976 Multatuli biography that the author was not a revolutionary at all. Multatuli did not want to reorganize the societal structure, but he wanted individuals to change their behaviour. Admitting that it would be disastrous if Holland lost

1 This paper was realized as part of the PhD-project "The autonomy of the Dutch literary author: boundaries and possibilities." It is part of the NWO-funded project "The power of autonomous literature: Willem Frederik Hermans" (supervised by Wilbert Smulders, Frans Ruiters and Geert Buelens). I would like to thank the supervisors and Saskia Pieterse for their advice and Esmée Fein and Claire Stocks for proofreading.

2 Zook (2007) 1183.

3 Pieterse (2010) 55–56; Salverda (2007).

4 Zook (2007), 1187–1188, note 32.

its colony, he argued for high moral standards, to prevent future upheaval in the Indies.⁵

As far as the question of literary newness is concerned, Zook's claims are fresher. Still, he takes a somewhat rigid position when he claims that it is "either/or": Multatuli is a "modernist" writer *or* he is "anti-modernist." The general consensus in recent Multatuli studies seems to be that this author's position is not one-dimensional. Some critics (e.g. E.M. Beekman) do indeed claim that this ambiguity makes the works typically "modern," while other critics (e.g. Saskia Pieterse) do not go that far.⁶ One could even say that his "(anti)modern" stance is one of the recurring points of debate in the reception of Multatuli's works. Very often, progressive politicians and writers tried to incorporate him into their political plans (of liberalism, feminism, anarchism, socialism...), but Multatuli always tried to stay away from these groups.⁷ If history had taken a different direction, Multatuli would have become a conservative politician in the 1860s.⁸

It is not my intention to present my own view on the problem of Multatuli's (anti)modernist stance. I want to rephrase the question and wonder *why* generations of readers have come to address the problem of a progressive or anti-progressive tendency in the oeuvre. The complexity of Multatuli's works provokes discussions among every new generation of Dutch readers. The way these works address the reader might contribute to the oeuvre's continuing allure and controversial status.

Multatuli's texts offer us a paradoxical "reading contract": they try to strike up a friendship with the reader, but reject the possibility of this friendly contact at the same time.⁹ I will show how this game of attracting and rejecting works, and what its effects are. Multatuli's peculiar way of communicating with the reader on the one hand raises the feeling that this author wants to do something radically new, while on the other hand it contributes to a literary strategy which was very common at that time.

I do not want to claim that all meaning in a text is produced by the author. A writer does, in my opinion, create a place for the reader in the text – the so-called "implied" or "mock reader," who (in the texts we are discussing here) is

5 Hermans (1976) 92.

6 Beekman (1996) 202–52; Pieterse (2008, 2010).

7 Everard and Jansz (2010); Gasenbeek (2010).

8 van der Meulen (2003) 535–57.

9 Cf. Booth's remarks on "Implied Authors as Friends and Pretenders." Booth (1988) 169–98. For a slightly different view on Multatuli's relationship with readers, see Pieterse (2008) 48–59.

often explicitly addressed.¹⁰ Actual readers are, of course, not identical to their textual counterparts. They can be unwilling, or unable, to identify themselves with the “reader-in-the-text” – they can act as “resisting readers.”¹¹ My analysis will clarify this situation to show that every text produces different meanings for different readers, depending on their historical, literary or ideological horizons. Still, it might be valuable to investigate to what extent the reception of an author’s work by his or her readers is the product of certain characteristics of the literary text. That is what this article aims to do.

My analysis focuses on one of the least known works by Multatuli, the pamphlet *Show me the place where I sowed!* (*Wijs mij de plaats waar ik gezaaid heb!*, 1861). This novella, published to benefit the people stricken by a flood in the Dutch East Indies in 1861, is perhaps the most “sentimental” of the author’s books. It can only be understood properly when placed in the context of the forgotten tradition of Dutch benevolence literature. In the next two sections, I will give a rough sketch of benevolence literature as it functioned in the 1860s, and of its political significance. After that, *Show me the place* will be analyzed against the backdrop of this tradition.

Benevolence Literature Around 1861

The front cover of *Show me the place where I sowed!* explicitly mentions that this is a benevolence book: “Published for the benefit of the people destitute after the flood in the Dutch East Indies.”¹² The words “published for the benefit of...” functioned as a formula, which indicated that a book was a so-called “benevolence publication.”¹³ All profits from these books were meant to benefit the people affected by a flood, a storm, a large fire or poverty. Two groups can be distinguished within the material: books republished for charity or books specifically written for the good cause. Here, I will focus on the second group of texts.

In 1861, the production of benevolence books appears to have reached its peak.¹⁴ An estimated amount of 110 books were published in this year. Most of

10 For the term “mock reader,” see Booth (1975). Cf. Herman and Vervaeck (2005) 20–22.

11 Fetterley (1978).

12 “*Uitgegeven ten behoeve der noodlijdenden door de overstroming in Nederlandsch Indië.*” Multatuli (1861a) front cover. All translations of Dutch texts in this article are mine.

13 For the modern term “benevolence publication,” see den Boer (1994).

14 Den Boer (1994) counted 67 publications about the flood of 1855, and 87 about the flood of 1861. However, she missed a significant number of books from the latter year, some of which were summarized in the *Nederlandsche bibliographie* of 17th May 1861 and 28th

them were written after a flood in the mid-eastern part of the Netherlands, a few (like Multatuli's) were published after the Javanese disaster. One of the reasons for suspecting that this number of books was relatively high, is that contemporary critics showed their surprise at the benevolence production of 1861. In some newspaper articles or pamphlets, the literary quality of the "flood" of benevolence books was ridiculed. The liberal poet P.A. de Génestet, for example, mocked the poor quality of benevolence poems, but praised the Dutch readers at the same time, because their financial contributions for the good cause made "nutritious bread [...] out of Water poetry."¹⁵ So, de Génestet was not against benevolence through the sale of books per se, but he objected to the mass production of inferior poems that resulted from such sales. Inferior or not, the readers loved buying benevolence books. *Show me the place*, for instance, was reprinted within a few weeks after its first publication. The publisher Nijgh received more than 1300 guilders for the two editions of the book. Considering that it was sold for 60 cents, over 2100 copies must have been sold.¹⁶ In the same year, the poet Bernard ter Haar earned an astonishing 3000 guilders from a benevolence book.¹⁷ It would seem that the negative reactions of the critics did not conflict with the popularity of the books for the reading public.

It is very unlikely that the buyers of benevolence books always enjoyed every page of the works they acquired. Presumably, they considered it their duty to buy them, just as the benevolence writers considered it their duty to write them. In the 1860s, Dutch social politics to a large extent relied on charity. There was no socio-political structure within which questions of poverty, disasters, or other social problems could be addressed, so another system had to be established: private enterprises carried out several charity projects.¹⁸ For the liberal democratic leaders of the country, private initiatives were important to prevent the state from becoming too powerful. For large groups of Christian civilians, charity projects were the only acceptable way of (re)structuring society.

September 1861. In total, I counted no less than 110 books about the flood of 1861. Although we do not have precise numbers of titles published after the floods of earlier years (1809, 1820, 1825), my bibliographical survey indicates that far less books were issued in these years.

15 "[V]oedend brood kan maken / van Waterpoëzij." Schim van Braga (1861) 7. For a more comprehensive analysis of some satirical pamphlets, see Ham (2012).

16 Multatuli (1865) 30.

17 Mathijssen (2002) 225.

18 Hoekstra (2005).

Although some research has been conducted recently on charity in the Dutch nineteenth century,¹⁹ the genre of benevolence literature as a whole has received little attention from scholars: only a few short articles and an unpublished masters thesis have been written on the subject.²⁰ This scholarship, published within the past few decades, tends to analyze benevolence literature as a literary practice with many positive political effects: writers showed their social involvement and so were able to influence social conditions.

I propose a more critical approach, framing benevolence literature as a conservative practice which refashioned society according to the desires of the Christian and liberal upper and middle classes. It established a communicative pact between congenial readers, by means of prologues and epilogues, in which the bourgeois backgrounds of both the producers and the consumers were emphasized. It seems unlikely that lower class readers purchased these books.²¹ They were more or less explicitly excluded from the literary communication, although the donations of benevolence books were often meant for them. Therefore, one could call literary benevolence a paternalistic initiative, a powerful instrument to control the societal hierarchy.

One of the books that was published during the 1861 flood in the Netherlands clearly displays the way in which this communicative agreement works. This short prose work, *In the attic* (*Op den zolder*, 1861) by the highly popular commercial writer Jacob Jan Cremer,²² is about a family living in the countryside, forced to flee from the rising water and finding a refuge in their attic. Because it is February, the cold threatens their lives. The father succeeds in making a fire, but when his daughter burns her feet from the flames, he needs to put out the fire. While there is little hope that they will survive this ordeal, the last section of the book presents a miraculous recovery, followed by the moral of the story. God's reasons for sending this flood are explained in the last lines:

[H]ere they come, here they come! – yes – yes look – here they come to save you. Listen to the splashing sound of the oars. Listen to the voices. You, numb with cold! You, dead tired! You, half-dead people! Shout with

19 For instance Houkes (2009) 47–71.

20 Dongelmans (1990); den Boer (1994); Mathijssen (2002, 2008).

21 Cf. van den Berg and Couttenier (2009) 547, on the contact between readers and writers in the nineteenth century. Book historians, however, have never attempted to write about the consumption of benevolence literature.

22 I chose to discuss this work mainly because it is mentioned in Multatuli's *Show me the place where I sowed!* Compared with Cremer's somewhat stereotypical text, we see how provocative Multatuli's pamphlet must have been for the contemporary reader.

joy: "There is salvation!" You, put to the test! Praise, praise the Lord, because the misery of your house and the misfortune of your village, meant for the well-being of *your* souls, also reflected GOD'S CALL FOR LOVE AND COMPASSION, MEANT FOR ALL DUTCH PEOPLE!²³

Cremer communicates with the casualties of the flood here, by addressing his fictional characters directly. It is clear that these characters are powerless; they require godlike saviours to rescue them. The disaster is interpreted as an act of God, who has "used" this disaster to convince his people to be pious Christians. The people who live in the flooded area are urged to live a devout life, while the civilians who buy *In the attic* are given the opportunity to show their compassion. From a strictly rationalized perspective, this disaster is incomprehensible, but it becomes acceptable in the context of a Protestant worldview. It is the buying public that is best qualified to soften the blow to the afflicted families, so fulfilling their Christian obligations. The epilogue of *In the attic* is explicitly directed to these readers: "Esteemed Reader, not stricken by the flood..."²⁴ This well-to-do class of readers has already sacrificed "significant gifts on the altar of love," according to Cremer.²⁵ Still, they are able to relieve the casualties' needs even more with new donations.

The Politics of Benevolence

In the last section, benevolence literature was, rather unambiguously, read as a literary genre with a conservative political agenda. The reader's interpretive position seems to be inscribed in the text: it constructs a conservative, explicitly addressed reader. Another framing is possible, however, if we take three things into account. Firstly, the reader can choose (more or less deliberately) not to connect with the position of the reader in the text. When critically evaluating the ideology of *In the attic* and other philanthropic books, the interpreter uses a way of reading which might have been "unthinkable" in 1861. To use a term introduced by the literary critic Derek Attridge, every reading

23 "[D]aar komen ze, daar komen ze! – ja – ja zie maar – daar komen ze om u te redden. Hoor dan het klotsen der riemen. Hoor dan die stemmen. Verstijfden! afgetobden! halve dooden! juich, juich: "Daar komt redding!" Beproofden! loof, loof dan den Heer, want zie, de nood van uw huis en het wee uwer oorden – zij het almée tot heil uwer zielen – het was ook: DE WEKSTEMME GODS TOT LIEFDE, VOOR HEEL HET NEËRLANDSCHE VOLK!" Cremer (1861) 26.

24 "Waarde en niet door den watersnood beproefde Lezer," Cremer (1861) 27.

25 Cremer (1861) 27.

process is a “performance,” in which the text, the author and the reader converge.²⁶ These performances are to a large extent influenced by the historical and ideological backgrounds of the reader.

Secondly, the fundamental ambiguity in the process of producing meaning has to be taken into account. According to theorists in the fields of New Historicism or Cultural Materialism, every text undermines its own ideology. An apparently conservative text like *In the attic* might serve as an example. While this book silences the lower-class readers for which it collects money, at the same time it brings these people implicitly into view. Cremer’s appeal to the “Reader, not stricken by the flood” can only be meaningful when another individual (the one who *is* stricken by the flood) is taken into account. Moreover, the fact that the reading pact between like-minded writers and readers has to be re-established time and time again, proves that it is not a natural pact. Whereas Attridge seems to think that only literary masterpieces are able to represent the hitherto unthinkable, to bring the cultural “Other” into being, some critics reject the idea that only *some* texts are able to do that. Catherine Belsey, for example, presents every text as a possible *locus* of “dissent.”²⁷

There is a third reason to take the ideological meaning of benevolence into reconsideration. Recent American criticism has shown that the genre of sentimental fiction, which was and often is regarded as a highly conservative literary practice, might be understood in a more “progressive” way. To some extent, benevolence literature can be compared with the sentimental genre; that is why it is insightful to introduce this American debate in slightly greater detail.

One of the texts which succeeded in bringing sentimental fiction back to critical attention was a chapter in Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational designs* (1985).²⁸ In her text, Tompkins argued that the ideas about the naïveté of sentimental novels (such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s million-selling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) were largely related to the gendered and modernist values of literary scholars. American sentimental fiction, often written by middle-class white women, followed an aesthetic which differed radically from the one twentieth-century scholars had adopted. According to Tompkins, these scholars refused to take the nineteenth-century literary values into account, whereas some knowledge about these values is necessary to understand why these novels came to be so extremely popular in their age. Tompkins not only re-emphasized the cultural importance of sentimental literature, she also started a debate on the politics of sentimentalism which has continued well into the twenty-first century.

26 Attridge (2004) 95–106.

27 Belsey (1999) 1–25.

28 Tompkins (1985).

Some critics discussed its conservative (racial) ideas,²⁹ but others tried to follow Tompkins in the idea that these texts provided an opening to more progressive politics. The volume *Our sisters' keepers*, for instance, argues for the political possibilities benevolence literature enforced for the nineteenth century women who wrote the texts:

[T]he writers of benevolence literature have done nothing less than re-envision the American individual. In the face of an ethos of individualism and self-reliance, nineteenth-century women writers saw the value of and need for connection with others. Hence, they imagined the self as a dynamic entity that seeks a balance between selfish and selfless pursuits, between concerns with the individual self and with the self that is created in relation to another.³⁰

Marianne Noble as well reads sentimental literature as both “positively” and “negatively” connoted. She analyzes a rhetorical effect in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she calls “sentimental wounding,” “a bodily experience of anguish caused by identification with the pain of another.”³¹ According to Noble, sentimental wounding can have the positive effect of involving readers emotionally, but it had the unintentional effect of sexualizing the body of the victim.

For Dutch benevolence literature, the question of positive effects on readers and writers might be addressed as well. Can the sentimentality of *In the attic* be interpreted as a way of confronting the higher- or middle-class readers with the devastating effects of disasters on their fellow citizens? Moreover, is it possible to recognize a more liberal and liberalizing tendency in this novella? In the last lines of Cremer's epilogue to the book, he approaches the victims explicitly and shows them that they do have agency in improving their daily lives:

Perhaps one question is not inappropriate here...? It is a hint for the inhabitants of areas that are threatened by floods, year after year. Would it be possible for you to put up a hill in your district, when there is not that much work to be done; a large terp on which a big shed can be placed, to save your belongings when a disaster is at hand...?³²

29 Sundquist (1986).

30 Bergman and Bernardi (2005) 1.

31 Noble (1997) 295.

32 “Zou een vraag hier ongepast zijn; een wenk voor de bewoners der oorden die telken jare toch, aan de gevaren van watersnood bloot staan...? Kunt gij in tijden, wanneer er handen teveel zijn, geen heuvel opwerpen in uwe gemeenten; een brede terp waarop een groote loots [sic]

The politics of benevolence literature can be interpreted, therefore, in a less one-dimensional way than I have shown in the previous section. The reader not only had the power to refuse the conservative reading-pact offered to him or her, but he or she could go so far as to activate an emancipatory meaning in the text: sentimental benevolence books might be able to make connections between different groups in society.

With these ideas about the “progressive” political possibilities of benevolence literature in mind, we are now ready to analyze Multatuli’s *Show me the place where I sowed!* We will see that this novel deploys the typical characteristics of benevolence literature in a somewhat provocative manner. On the one hand, the author rejects the “affirmative” pact with the bourgeois reader. On the other hand, he sometimes confirms the contact with his readers, and tries to activate empathy for the Javanese people. In other words: he exploits an emancipatory effect in benevolence literature that was always there, but never stated explicitly.

Multatuli’s *Show me the place where I sowed!*

Multatuli’s *Show me the place* was commissioned by the Rotterdam publisher Nijgh, an important company at that time. Whilst we can believe that the practice of writing benevolence books by commission was fairly common, there are few sources to prove this. One of the most notable is in fact *Show me the place*, since Multatuli introduces his book with the disclaimer: “Mister Nijgh asked me today to write a ‘something’ for the benefit of the casualties of the Javanese flood.”³³

Here, the author violates an unwritten rule of philanthropic literature. When authors of benevolence books talk about themselves or their reasons for writing a book, they do so in paratexts, such as prologues or epilogues: the main text of the book is not the appropriate location for a metafictional commentary. Yet Multatuli starts with a long metafictional fragment that ultimately will form a large part of the book. By doing so he not only rejects the common “rules” of the benevolence genre, but he distances himself from the reader as well.

moest geplaatst worden om, bij naderende ramp, te bergen wat er te bergen is....? Cremer (1861) 27–28.

33 “De heer Nijgh wendde zich heden tot mij met een verzoek om een ‘iets’ ten voordeele van de slagtoffers van de overstrooming op Java.” Multatuli (1861a) 3.

According to Multatuli, he “cannot write and does not like writing.”³⁴ This polemical statement is meant to distinguish him from his contemporaries. To prove his point, Multatuli discusses one recent benevolence book: Cremer’s *In the attic*. Multatuli’s “analysis” can hardly be called a reading of the book, since he does not even open it – although he admits that it lies in front of him. *In the attic* is bound to be so predictable, he argues, that it is not even necessary for him to read it. Confidently and with some ironic remarks, Multatuli “summarizes” the content of Cremer’s novella. His description of the novel’s plot corresponds partly to the actual content, especially when it comes to the last words of *In the attic*: “Look at what you see on the last page of all flood pamphlets: God is love!”³⁵

Cremer is exactly the kind of writer whom Multatuli does not want to be: a prose writer. Fiction is a perverse way to arouse sympathy in the reader, according to Multatuli’s poetics.³⁶ With a striking metaphor, he states: “If someone once would inflict a deep wound on mister CREMER – Lord save him – nobody would believe in the sincerity of his grief. His cry of pain as a human being would pass unnoticed, because people remember his tune as an artist.”³⁷ This use of the metaphor of the wound – which may be interpreted here as both *mental* and *physical* pain³⁸ – reminds us of Marianne Noble’s analysis of the role of “sentimental wounding.” Whereas Harriet Beecher Stowe seems to be very confident about how to raise empathy by describing physical suffering, Multatuli is very sceptical about this possibility.

So, the difference between “conventional” writers and Multatuli is made clear from the beginning of *Show me the place*. At the same time, he refers to the great gap between himself and his readers. Cremer tried to emphasize the equality between himself and the middle-class reader, but Multatuli does the exact opposite. After a deliberately obscure fragment in the first pages of his text, he writes ironically:

[N]othing [is] more probable [...] than the improbable. Do you want evidence of that, reader? When you planned to read this text, did you

34 “...dat ik niet schrijven kan, en niet van schrijven houd.” Multatuli (1861a) 3.

35 “Zie de laatste bladzijde van alle watersnood-brochures: God is liefde!” Multatuli (1861a) 10. Cf. Cremer (1861) 9, 26.

36 Cf. Pieterse (2008) 286–97.

37 “Als den heer CREMER eenmaal, God beware hem wensch ik, eene diep treffende wond werd geslagen, zou niemand gelooven aan de opregtheid zijner smart. De jammerkreet van de mensch zou onopgemerkt wegsterven, wijl men zich den toon herinnert van den artist.” Multatuli (1861a) 6.

38 In Dutch, the word “*smart*” [pain] can be used to refer to both.

consider it likely that you would meet Briseïs next to cherrystones, or HUGO DE GROOT next to Dutch charity and an excursus on probabilism, all in the first page of a “something” about the Javanese flood?

That is the main reason why I hate writing for the readership, that does not like mental jumps and expects the writer to move on just like the others.³⁹

Here, Multatuli makes clear that his aversion to writing stems from his problematic relationship with his readers. But why does he judge the reading public so negatively? The first reason might be that Multatuli’s “natural” way of thinking and writing, which requires many mental jumps on the part of his readers, is not appreciated by them. However, his mentioning of Briseïs points to a second, even more important reason. Multatuli seems to be disappointed by his readers: “[T]he non-craftsmanship part of my ‘trade,’ is so completely conflicting with my nature, that, indeed, less talent is needed to bring the Dutch nation to beneficence, than to lure me away from the tent where I sit sulking about Briseïs.”⁴⁰

The author equates himself with the Greek hero Achilles, who, in the *Iliad*, sat in anger in his military tent after Agamemnon had robbed him of his female slave Briseïs and refused to return to battle in the Trojan War; it was only after his best friend Patroclus had died in battle that Achilles went back to the field. Multatuli compares his recent career with Achilles’ story. After the publication of *Max Havelaar*, a book which he expected to be of direct political significance, the author was extremely disappointed by the reception of his novel.⁴¹ Readers praised the book’s superior style, but they did not take its political message seriously, according to the author. Like Achilles who put aside his anger after Patroclus died, Multatuli is willing to forget his rage after Nijgh asked him to write a new book. His main goal, however, was not to obey the wish of the publisher, but to have his revenge on the readers for their indifference.

39 “[N]iets [is] waarschijnlijker [...] dan de onwaarschijnlijkheid. Wilt gij bewijzen, lezer? Hadt gy ‘t vooraf waarschijnlijk gevonden Briseïs met kerssepitten, HUGO DE GROOT en de Nederlandsche weldadigheid met een zijspromg op de probabiliteitsleer te ontmoeten op dit eerste blaadje van het gevraagde ‘Iets’ over den Javaschen watersnood? [...] Ook vooral daarom heb ik een afkeer van schrijven voor het publiek, dat niet van sprongen houdt, wijl men van den schrijver verlangt dat hij zich voortbewege als een ander.” Multatuli (1861a) 4.

40 “[H]et niet-ambachtelijk gedeelte van het ‘vak’ [...] strijdt zo geheel tegen mijne natuur, dat er inderdaad geringer talent noodig is om de Nederlandsche natie te bewegen tot weldadigheid, dan om mij weg te lokken uit de tent waar ik pruil om Briseïs.” Multatuli (1861a) 3.

41 Van der Meulen (2003) 413–21.

Show me the place is, indeed, a sarcastic and almost aggressive text, which constantly emphasizes the difference between the author and the readership. While Multatuli wrote *Max Havelaar* more or less in an affirmative, “traditional” manner by seeking sympathy in his public, from this moment on his writings take the form of an attack. Yet every time Multatuli tries to provoke the readers, he tries to attract them as well. That strategy is wonderfully phrased in his second novel *Love Letters*, written shortly after *Show me the place*: “Ladies and gentlemen, I despise you with the deepest sincerity.”⁴²

Many parts of *Show me the place* are concerned with widening the gap in literary communication. In the first part of the text, Multatuli calls it a “disharmony between precentor and congregation.”⁴³ This ecclesiastical metaphor is well chosen: it emphasizes that the friendly contact between producers and consumers of benevolence literature was not only guaranteed by their similar social position, but also by their shared religious ideas. Multatuli, however, underlines that he is not a Christian, but an outsider who tackles his fellow citizens on their social responsibilities: “Your belief is at stake, your Christ is at stake!”⁴⁴

Although Multatuli dismisses some of the key characteristics of benevolence literature, he does employ others. After the largely metafictional first part of the book, he tells a typically “sentimental” story to illustrate the annihilating effects of the flood.⁴⁵ The Javanese Karidien has just survived a tiger attack; he, his family and some other people from their village are dining together and are discussing the incident. A surprisingly large part of the story is devoted to the introduction of the the story’s characters. They are presented in a conventional way. First, an extensive extract focuses on introducing the character of Karidien and telling his story. After that, a smaller part establishes a portrait of Karidien’s wife Amia, who is expecting her first baby. An even smaller part mentions the names and characters of other children who are present. This way of narrating may be highly gendered – a man, Karidien, is presented as the most important and most dynamic character – but still this introduction is surprising. It presents several Javanese people as named

42 “Publiek, ik veracht u met groote innigheid.” Multatuli (1861b) 17. Cf. Pieterse (2008) 7–39. In the epilogue for the third edition of *Show me the place where I sowed*, Multatuli repeats these words: Multatuli (1865) 32.

43 Multatuli (1861a) 5.

44 “Het geldt de eer van Uw geloof; het geldt de eer van Uwen Christus!” Multatuli (1861a) 21.

45 This passage resembles the story of the Javanese children Saïdjah and Adinda in Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar*. In both cases, the sentimental story is embedded in a metafictional framework, in which the author comments on his own text. It is worth noting that, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is explicitly mentioned in *Max Havelaar*. Multatuli (1987) 278–79.

individuals complete with feelings – a perspective which was far from common in the Dutch colonies in 1861. The narrator's voice emphasizes how important it is to look at these people as human beings: "You, who for your own interest try to banish the Javanese from the large family of humanity, do you think that a mother there, is no *mother*?"⁴⁶

The reader is shown how these Javanese families are surprised by the "banjir" (the Javanese word for flood), how everything is swept away, and how not one person is saved from death. Atrocious details are used to describe the disaster: "And *Amia*, who would be called *Emboh Sarie*?⁴⁷ Is one supposed to look for a woman, or for a *mother*? Is it her, who is lying there with a painful twist to her mouth, as if she succumbed to a double death? Would that have been her child, that clod without a form, that was born in the water?"⁴⁸ Time and time again, the story's narrator underlines the fact that these victims were human beings, just like the readers. "The bodies that lie there, and will probably spread the plague, are bodies of *human beings*! They felt things, they hoped, they feared just like us, they deserved happiness just like us, ... reader, they were *human beings*, these Javanese!"⁴⁹ Multatuli not only makes the Dutch readers eye-witnesses of what happens to the Javanese people, he even tries to inscribe the latter's suffering into the readers' bodies: "[W]e hear the last sighs, we feel the last cramps, we catch the last prayers, – and we feel cold in our hearts."⁵⁰ Here, Multatuli uses the rhetorical device of "sentimental wounding" to affect, and afflict, his readers.

It is clear that Multatuli does make a connection with his public, albeit in a different way from Cremer. For the latter, the relationship between him and his readers seems to be the foremost aim; the bond between the person who reads and the fictional characters is far less important. Cremer does try to raise em-

46 "O gij, die uit belangzucht den Javaan tracht weg te stooten uit de groote familie der menschheid, meent gij dat eene moeder daar, geene moeder is?" Multatuli (1861a) 25.

47 Elsewhere in *Show me the place*, the narrator explains that Javanese women are called after their first children. This is why *Amia*'s name would be changed in *Emboh Sarie*. Multatuli (1861a) 24–25.

48 "En *Amia* die *Emboh Sarie* heeten zou? Moet men eene vrouw zoeken of eene moeder? Zou zij het wezen, zij die daar ligt met pijnlijken trek als ware zij bezweken onder een' dubbelen dood? Zou dat haar kind geweest zijn, dat vormloos klompje, dat geboren werd in het water?" Multatuli (1861a) 33.

49 'Die lijken die daar liggen, en dreigen met pest, zijn de lijken van menschen! Zij voelden, hoopten, vreesden als wij, hadden aanspraak op levensgeluk als wij, ... lezer, het waren menschen, die *Javanen*!' Multatuli (1861a) 34.

50 "[W]ij hooren de laatste zuchten, wij voelen die laatste trekking der spieren, wij verstaan die laatste beden, – en het wordt ons eng om het hart." Multatuli (1861a) 33–34.

pathy, but when the characters' suffering comes "too close to home" he holds back. Take the following example, which describes how the fictional characters try to take shelter in their attic:

[N]o, who demands the description of the dark night which will follow! who desires – be it imaginary – to watch through the dreadful night with Hanneke Daalhof, while she needs to constantly force herself to stay awake, to cherish her beloved children as long as she is able to do so – be it very inadequate. No, no! Your heart would break if you heard the laments and wails which repeatedly fill the attic.⁵¹

Whereas Multatuli makes his readers *feel* the pain and anguish of the fictional characters, Cremer places them in the position of distanced witnesses, who are supposed *not* to empathize too much with the characters. Multatuli breaks the conventional reading agreement between the reader and the author, so that he can emphasize more forcefully the relationship between the reader and the character in the story. That he should choose to do so through fiction, illustrates that Multatuli's condemnation of fictionality is not as definitive as it seems. Although the metafictional framework forms a large part of the book, the fictional story seems to be the central part.

Conclusion

From the above analyses of *In the attic* and *Show me the place where I sowed!*, it is clear that Multatuli had a complex relationship with benevolence literature, seemingly rejecting some of the fundamental characteristics of the genre, notably in the first part of the book where he highlights the difference between himself and writers like Cremer. Multatuli portrays Cremer as a conservative, unoriginal, even naïve author, because he uses the instrument of fiction to convince his readers. Moreover, Multatuli chooses to approach his readership in a completely different way; whereas for Cremer a friendly contact is crucial, Multatuli accentuates the differences.

51 "[N]ee, wie eischt de beschrijving van den donkeren nacht die gaat volgen! wie heeft er lust om – zij het in de verbeelding – met Hanneke Daalhof dien schrikkelijken nacht te doorwaken, terwijl zij zich telkens moet geweld doen om wakker te blijven, ten einde haar dierbare kinders – al zij het dan uiterst gebrekkig – te koesteren wat ze nog kan. Neen, neen! Uw hart zoude breken wanneer gij de smart- en de jammerkreeten aan moest hooren die gedurig den zolder vervullen." Cremer (1861) 24–25.

By eloquently mocking contemporary writers and literary practices Multatuli aimed to stress the uniqueness of his work. His determination to create a singular status for himself might suggest one way in which contemporary scholarship is able to view him as a brilliant, typically modern individual, who famously changed the culture of literary consensus into a culture of “dissensus.”⁵² And yet the situation is more complex. Later on in *Show me the place*, the reader recognizes that Multatuli cannot distance himself completely from the rules of benevolence literature. The metafictional passages eventually end up in a fictional story about the flood, which makes use of conventional instruments (such as “sentimental wounding”) to raise empathy. One could say that cutting the ties between himself and his readers (which was a “modern” technique in the 1860s), made it even more effective for Multatuli to establish relations between the persons who read his work and the fictional characters living it.

The metaphor of “sowing” in the book title could refer to the effect Multatuli aims to create: namely in his writings he often presents an author as an individual who is able to find “fertile ground” for his ideas in the reader.⁵³ Of course, the choice of this title may be far more conventional: namely that the Dutch coloniser is presented as the one to “cultivate” both the Javanese soil and souls. Thus, the author seems to make a connection between writing and imperialism; both are colonizing acts.⁵⁴ There is, to be sure, no indication that he uses this metaphor in a critical or progressive way. Multatuli firmly believes that wise colonialism is a just practice, and that affecting readers is something for the writer to strive for.

It is questionable whether categories of “modern” or “anti-modern” techniques and ideas are still applicable here. Rather this author appears to focus on the possibilities inherent within the benevolence genre. With “sensational,” sentimental writing techniques, he shows us what impact an occasional genre is capable of creating.

The questions that the modern reader of *Show me the place where I sowed!* must face (such as “Is this a modern text, or not?” or “Does Multatuli take a conservative view with regard to colonialism?”) are typical of his oeuvre. It seems that its intelligent and provocative rhetoric, and its specific way of communicating with (implied) readers, constantly encourages us to think of Multatuli as the first modern Dutch writer. The ultimate question is thus not

52 For the mid-nineteenth-century transition of a culture of “consensus” to one of “dissensus,” see Ruiter and Smulders (1996) 17–29.

53 See Pieterse (2008) 103–07 for an analysis of Multatuli’s gendered view on reading.

54 Cf. the fascinating analysis of *Max Havelaar* and “writing as colonizing” in Wright (1990).

whether this is true or not, but how he makes us think that it is, through the powerful style of writing.

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