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The Great Disagreeable? A Different Image of Willem Bilderdijk

Preface

'To talk about Bilderdijk in public is a perilous undertaking' according to Nicolaas Beets¹, who was a great admirer.² During the 19th century Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831) stirred up strong feelings, even after his death. Born as a 'wonderkind' he succeeded in becoming a famous poet after winning a Leyden poet contest in 1776. During the political unrest in the eighties, the Patriot period, he took side for the stadtholder and the family of Orange. Because of his immovability after the inroad of the French armies in 1795 he was exiled. He stayed in England and Germany for over ten years. In 1806 he finally returned to Holland. Because of works like *Disease of the Learned* (1807) and *The Art of Poetry* (1809) he developed into the greatest poet of his time, who made his mark on the prevailing poetical ideas. By contemporaries he was called 'Vondel II'. In 1830 he was rewarded with the prestigious golden medal of the Leyden Society of Dutch Literature.³ In literary history he is regarded as an important exponent of the Dutch Romanticism.⁴

Adored and reviled

In 1817 Bilderdijk settled in Leiden. At that moment his fame was unprecedented.⁵ In 1815, a critic suggested to stop writing reviews of his poems, because his fame could not be further enlarged anymore.⁶ Bilderdijk presented himself as the prototype of the 'true' poet, in the first place due to his

- 1 Beets (1856: 255).
- 2 Mathijssen (2004: 41–52).
- 3 Honings (2009a).
- 4 Honings (2006: 75–88).
- 5 Honings (2006).
- 6 Kollwijn (1891/2: 77).

image. He looked like a 'wandering anachronism', as if he had appeared from the eighteenth century.⁷ His strange appearance made an important contribution to his unique position. Often he wore a Turkish turban around his head, to suppress his unbearable headaches.⁸ It is quite possible that the association with the oriental literature, in which people saw the essence of true poethood, played a part.⁹ Furthermore Bilderdijk made it appear as if his writing was an organic (romantic) process. Whenever he was touched by divine inspiration, he became feverish and restless, and just had to pour out his strong feelings, comparable to a fountain or an orgasm, and write them down.¹⁰ Judging by his original manuscripts, that contain a lot of corrections, he consciously tried to mythologize. His poems did not faultlessly gush from a divine providence, as he wanted us to believe, but were created by a lot of polishing.¹¹ But in regard to his environment Bilderdijk was considered the incarnation of the true poet. For this reason, Willem de Clercq called him the 'Rembrandt of poets'.¹²

Bilderdijk was not only admired. During the 1820's he became the target of criticism. In Leiden he worked as a private lecturer, because he could not be appointed professor. He acquired a small group of dedicated students, like Isaac da Costa and Jacob van Lennep, whom he educated in the fields of national history and municipal law. Slowly but surely Bilderdijk was on bad terms with most of the literary men of his time, because of his offensive ideas and activities. In the first place Bilderdijk was abused as a consequence of his struggle against the new spelling (proposed by Siegenbeek in 1804).¹³ He was particularly attacked as a result of his provocative religious, political and cultural ideas. Bilderdijk became the central figure of the 'Réveil': an orthodox Protestant group that resists against the nineteenth-century Enlightenment.¹⁴ His statements experienced a lot of resistance. This culminated in 1823, when Isaac da Costa published his controversial *Objections to the Spirit of the Age*, which was full of Bilderdijkian ideas.

The work, in which Da Costa renounced the achievements of the Enlightenment, resulted in a load of criticism. From Da Costa's point of view religion was wicked, in a sense that it dominates people's existence. It was a thorn in his flesh that humanity dethroned God. He blamed his contemporaries who abolished slavery; Negroes were created to serve the whites. He also

- 7 Van Zonneveld (2007: 6).
- 8 Wap (1874: 138).
- 9 De Hond (2008: 153–154).
- 10 Van Eijnatten (1998: 430); Kollwijn (1891/2: 441).
- 11 Van Eijnatten (1998: 432); Kollwijn (1891/2: 439).
- 12 De Clercq (1889/1: 64).
- 13 Mathijssen (2004: 137–145).
- 14 Kagchelland & Kagchelland (2009).

rejected the constitution. Furthermore he published a brief for abolition of freedom of press and vaccination programs. Illnesses and poverty were God's will; humans should not resist them. The majority of the Leyden intelligentsia denounced Da Costa's work, but Bilderdijk endorsed his opinions completely. He even published an explanation. As a result of this his social position eroded. Instead, people retained their admiration for the poet Bilderdijk. Contemporaries compared him to Homer and Milton. But because of his reactionary ideas he alienated from the Leiden literary life.

This ambivalent position persisted during the twentieth century. H. A. Gomperts (1915–1998) praised the 'greatness' of Bilderdijk's poetry, but despised his ideas. He designated him as an obscurantist, as a man who 'in the battle for the freedom of humanity chooses the wrong side' and who considered social inequality the will of God: In the Europe of Byron and Shelley, Goethe and Heine, Lamartine and Victor Hugo we can only feel ashamed of the romanticist Bilderdijk. He considered himself a prophet, he acted like a prophet. Now we should bury him as a false prophet.¹⁵

Bilderdijk was not only a controversial, but also a difficult, irascible person. His first wife testified about the maltreatments she had undergone. If his lessor asked for the rent, Bilderdijk frequently lost his temper. He had many enemies; from one day to the next friends could become enemies. In 1825 H. W. Tydeman collected money for the Greek independence war against the Turks. Bilderdijk, who was abhorrent of revolutions, wrote an angry letter and forbade Tydeman the entrance to his house; he refused to support the 'wicked Greek scum in their dreadful revolt'.¹⁶ Even though the quarrel was eventually resolved, it is illustrative for Bilderdijk, who even fought the spirit of the age against his friends. Huizinga for this reason called him the 'Great Disagreeable'.¹⁷

A different image

A different image is presented by two foreign guests.¹⁸ In the first place this was the German scholar A. H. Hoffmann von Fallersleben. In 1821 he trav-

- 15 Gomperts (1972: 19–20).
- 16 Kollwijn (1891/2: 289); Bilderdijk (1866–1867/2: 229).
- 17 Huizinga (1913: 28).
- 18 Van Zonneveld (2007: 6–9).

elled through Holland for research on Middle Dutch manuscripts. He visited Leiden,¹⁹ and Bilderdijk. Initially he was afraid:

Er war mir geschildert als launig und mißrissich, menschengefährlich, als ein wüthender Feind Deutschlands [...], als ein fanatischer Gegner aller freien Regungen in der Politik und Religion, [...] endlich als ein unversöhnlicher Feind aller derjenigen die anders dachten.

Bilderdijk indeed hated Germany, because of his bad experiences during his exile and his ideas about language corruption. But when Hoffmann met him, he seemed to be the total opposite:

Ich habe nie ein böses Wort über Deutschland aus seinem Munde gehört [...] hatte nie zu leiden von den leidenschaftlichen Äußerungen seiner reizbaren, oft trüben körperlichen und geistigen Stimmung.

Bilderdijk was friendly and would have said: 'obschon er ein Mof ist, so mag ich ihn doch wol leiden'.²⁰

A second image is given by the English 'Poet Laureate' Robert Southey, who visited Bilderdijk in 1825.²¹ Together with Wordsworth and Taylor Coleridge he is regarded as part of the 'Lake Poets'. The visit can be seen as an illustration of the contact between two exponents of the Romantic Movement, across language boundaries. Both poets knew each other as a result of the translation Bilderdijk's second wife K. W. Schweickhardt had made of Southey's *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (1814). He arrived on 26 June 1825. His journey was overshadowed by a foot injury. In France he had been stung by an insect. At his arrival in Leiden his wound was so inflamed that he had to call for a doctor. Because nobody could understand him, he wrote to Bilderdijk. When he heard that Southey was in town, he hurried to see him. Southey later wrote: 'We were friends at first sight'.

Bilderdijk invited him to stay at his house, 'where every imaginable care is taken of me, and every possible kindness shown'. He stayed for three weeks. Bilderdijk and he were soul mates, both in personal and political respect. To his wife Southey wrote: [Bilderdijk is] just as much abused by the Liberals in his country as I am in mine, and does "contempt" them as heartily and as merrily as I do.

Southey, his food resting on a chair, had a lot of time to read and write. Thanks to him we possess some characterisations of Bilderdijk and his fami-

ly. His presence in this 'peculiar and almost insulated family' was a special experience, as he noticed in his letters from Leiden. He wrote:

It threw me upon the charity of Bilderdijk and his wife, two of the best and most interesting people with whom it has ever been my fortune to become acquainted. And no part of my life ever passed more rapidly, more profitably, or more pleasantly, than while I was confined to the sofa under this roof.

He had never met a person like him: 'So extraordinary a man, in all respects, I have seldom or never met with'. To his wife he wrote that he had a strange vision of the necessity of sleep: 'Mr. B. is up till three or four, almost going without sleep at all'. Mrs. Bilderdijk was 'in no way inferior to him'. Their son, Lodewijk Willem, was a peculiar, weak and shy boy. He had no friends, never went to school, and only played with his stork, which he and his parents had saved: 'He is full of sensibility, and I look at him with some apprehension, for he is not strong'. Lodewijk gave Southey a book his father wrote for him: *Proverbs* (1823). Southey resolved to read it with his son. It contained Bilderdijkian sentences as: 'Who always looks at his Saviour, / Will never die of grief'.²²

Bilderdijk was proud of his wife. The Englishman knew about her miscarriages and deceased children. 'Her life seems almost a miracle after what she has gone through,' he wrote. He was surprised she was a famous poetess:

One would think it almost impossible that a person so meek, so quiet, so retiring, so altogether without display, should be a successful author, or hold the first place in her country as a poetess.

She could speak English very well, because she had lived in England for many years. Bilderdijk had a strange accent:

It is English pronounced like Dutch, and with such a mixture of other language, that it is an even chance whether the next word that comes be French, Latin, or Dutch, or [...] English.

But everything he said was 'full of information, vivacity, and character, and there is such a thorough good nature, kindness, and frankness about him'.

Southey recovered. One day he and his host family went for a trip, 'a walk in a carriage', as Bilderdijk called it. In a village they drank tea. There something funny happened, as the hostess asked Bilderdijk to read a poem, which was written by her husband. The fact that normal people recognized him, proved he was a celebrity. After his death he was exposed for years as a

19 Thomassen (1995: 35–38).

20 Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1868/1: 278–279).

21 Homings (2009b). Quotations of Southey's letters from this article.

22 Bilderdijk (1823: 19).

waxwork at fun fairs! The 15th July Southey said goodbye to his friends. Back in England their correspondence was resumed.

Conclusion

In June 1826 the friends met again, when Southey visited Leiden. A transcription of his diary is preserved in the Bilderdijk Museum in Amsterdam. Southey got a hearty welcome and was invited for dinner. Bilderdijk had visibly weakened. When Southey told his wife about this, her eyes filled with tears. She was ill as well. 'I talked as hopefully as I could of possibilities and seeing them again,' Southey wrote in his diary, but Bilderdijk said: 'When you come again, Sir, you will find *Hic situs est*. [Here lies]'. They never met again. But thanks to the report in letters that Southey wrote, we get, more than 180 years after, a surprising and deviant image of the 'Great Disagreeable'.

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