



## ‘I am not a Writer’: Self-Reflexivity and Politics in Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar*

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**Abstract:** The Dutch author Multatuli is mostly famous for his subversive and critical prose. In his debut-novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) he attacked the impassive, bureaucratic manner in which the Dutch government dealt with the maltreatment of the Javanese people. In the last two centuries, Multatuli's work has provoked a wide variety of, often contradictory, interpretations. A recurring question in Multatuli-studies is: if Multatuli wanted to make such strong and ambiguous political statements, why did he use such an intricate literary form? In this article, Pieterse formulates a new answer to this question, by looking at the specific relationship between literary self-reflexivity in *Max Havelaar*, and the substance of his political position.

**Keywords:** Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, Dutch Colonial History, Postcolonial Studies, Politics and literature, Self-Reflexivity

It is not easy to think of a novel with an ending as explosive as the one in *Max Havelaar* (1860). The author breaches the fictional framework and steps forward with the words: ‘I, Multatuli, take up the pen’. This ‘I, Multatuli’ states that if his indictment of the Dutch colonial rule in Java finds no response in the Netherlands, he will support the uprising of the Javanese people. He threatens to compose songs that will sharpen the knives of the Javanese rebels, and he will help them ‘by legal means, if possible...by the *legitimate* means of force, if *necessary*.’<sup>1</sup>

In the Netherlands, Multatuli is revered as the nation’s most important and influential writer. Characters and phrases of *Max Havelaar* have entered the collective consciousness, not least because the narrative deals with such emotionally charged aspects of Dutch colonial history. Internationally, the author’s political and critical body of thought has found recognition. Multatuli’s work was very popular in the Soviet Union:<sup>2</sup> Lenin mentions him three times in his notebook on imperialism, qualifying Multatuli’s writings as an exemplary denunciation of colonialism and capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson called Multatuli ‘the famous colonial [56] iconoclast’, while Pramoedya Ananta Toer dubbed *Max Havelaar* ‘the book that killed colonialism’.<sup>4</sup> Edward Said noted in passing that Multatuli did not use the usual imperialist discourse: ‘During the nineteenth century, if we exclude rare exceptions like the Dutch writer Multatuli, debate over colonies usually turned on their profitability, their management and mismanagement.’<sup>5</sup> But it was not only Multatuli’s critique of the colonial government that found resonance. After *Max Havelaar* he went on to attack the smothering of children’s and women’s sexual and intellectual curiosity by the puritan morale, and to debunk metaphysical notions such as providence and destiny. Freud knew Multatuli’s later work well and used some of the Dutch author’s key expressions in his own critique of metaphysical thought.<sup>6</sup>

This focus on the political and critical substance seems something Multatuli himself would have applauded, as he explicitly remarked on his indifference for aesthetic praise. He compares his way of writing to a mother crying for help because her child has fallen into the water.<sup>7</sup> In other words, he aims to write in such a way that the audience will be forced to act, as it would be immoral to treat such an immediate cry for help as a mere aesthetic literary object.

However, Multatuli's relationship to literature was far more complex. The narrative structure of *Max Havelaar* is self-reflexive, which means that the novel explicitly reflects on its own (in)capability of speaking the truth. None of these reflections are brought to an unambiguous conclusion. Instead the novel consistently undermines any unequivocal viewpoint and confronts the reader with a myriad of possible perspectives. Multatuli consciously places himself in the tradition of Heine, Sterne and Cervantes and his work is peppered with interwoven references to these authors. Tellingly, D.H. Lawrence compared Multatuli to authors who are also known for their double and ironic gestures: Jean Paul, Swift and Gogol.<sup>8</sup>

So on the one hand, Multatuli demands that his readers recognize the unambiguous immediacy of his indictment, and he even threatens to use violence if there is no response. On the other hand however, he associates himself with a self-reflexive literary tradition that revelled in ironic digressions, paradoxes and ambiguities. In other words, the novel is all about the moral obligation to take a firm stand but at the same time the text fiercely resists being pinned down to one single position.

In this article I will demonstrate that *Max Havelaar* confronts us with intriguing questions about the limits and possibilities of literature as a means of intervention in the political debate. Firstly I will discuss the existing secondary writings on *Max Havelaar*. It is not my aim to give a complete and chronological overview of the history of Multatuli studies. Instead I will focus on the way the relationship between politics and literature in *Max Havelaar* has been confronted so far.

Secondly, I will argue that despite the great diversity of readings of his work, these studies have overlooked until now an important aspect of Multatuli's critical [57] thought: he critiqued his own medium, the written word itself. I will demonstrate that this critique throws a new light on both the self-reflexive tendency of his work and on the substance of his political position.

For the sake of clarity I will only discuss secondary literature on *Max Havelaar* because this novel has generated the most debate. However, I think it is safe to say that the issues discussed here apply to his entire work. Therefore, I sometimes quote from some of his other works when this helps to highlight his position in a concise way.

## *Max Havelaar* in a nutshell

'Multatuli', the pen name of Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820–1887), is a pseudonym which approximately means 'I have suffered much'. In 1838, Douwes Dekker left his native Holland to work overseas in the East Indies. He soon obtained a post as a civil servant and in 1856 he was transferred to Lebak as 'Assistant Resident' in the Bantam residency of Java (now Banten province). Dekker tried to address the ill-treatment of the population by the Javanese nobility, as it was his duty 'to protect the native population against exploitation and oppression' – the official formula in the oath of appointment as Assistant Resident. However, he refused to follow the extremely slow formal procedures and so he bypassed his Dutch superior. This led to a conflict between Dekker and his superior, resulting in Dekker leaving the civil service.<sup>9</sup> Four

years after this fiasco his debut *Max Havelaar* was published. In this book he shapes the events that led to his departure from the civil service into a complex literary work of art.

I will attempt to convey *Max Havelaar* in a nutshell, to do so is in fact highly problematic. Early on in the story we find a long list of titles of dissertations and manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> Although this summary of titles covers five pages, the list itself is merely a fragment. This long but still fragmentary list of manuscripts gives us a glimpse into the abundance of ideas the author did not use, but *Max Havelaar*, as it stands, is already filled to the brim with ideas and digressions. To neatly summarize *Max Havelaar* amounts to amputating the exuberance and it is exactly this problem that lies at the heart of the book.

The story starts with a so-called frame narrative. This frame-narrative is humorous and fictitious. The narrator is a Dutch protestant coffee broker, introducing himself to us, the readers, as the publisher of the book we are holding. Drystubble curses novels, plays and poetry, for they all are deceitful in their portrayal of self-sacrifice as something that will ultimately be rewarded. He will not tell this lie and therefore his book will be the first – apart from the Bible – that is really useful and truthful.

He narrates the events that led him to become a one-time publisher. He received a bundle of manuscripts from an impoverished acquaintance who had failed in his colonial career. (It is Drystubble who sums up some of the titles in [58] this compilation). Although in Drystubble's view it is filled with the usual poetic lies, it also contains succinct reports on the colonial situation that prove that, unless something is done, uprising rebellion of the Javanese people will endanger the coffee trade. Drystubble believes it is his duty to make a book out of the manuscripts, a book that will wake up the Dutch nation as, at the time, the coffee trade was the mainstay of the Dutch economy.

Thanks to the economic obsessions of Drystubble, the seemingly endless lists of subjects in the manuscript are now narrowed down to one clearly defined theme. Drystubble admits that he is incapable of writing such a book himself, and he is therefore forced to ask his young German apprentice, Ernest Stern, for help. The young poetry-loving German ignores the coffee broker's instructions and constructs a very different tale out of the manuscripts: a story of the trials and tribulations of the Assistant Resident Max Havelaar. Havelaar immediately takes measures, as he wants to change the situation in the poverty-stricken district.<sup>11</sup>

What follows is not the straightforward story of Havelaar's conduct but a narrative that oscillates between different forms of representation. Part of Havelaar's struggle is told by means of lengthy quoted official documents and letters, while other parts are poetic fables. An important sub-narrative is the tragic story of Saïdjah and Adinda, two Javanese children whose lives are crushed by the dual power of the indigenous and the Dutch rule. The story of Max Havelaar ends with the hero's defeat, for he resigns from the civil service without having achieved anything.

Then, suddenly, Multatuli steps forward as the only true author. He dismisses his two narrators, Stern and Drystubble, as nothing more than fiction and criticizes Havelaar for being a naïve dreamer. Multatuli is very aggressive, directly addressing the king of the Netherlands, ordering the politicians to take action and demanding the rehabilitation of his honour.

Even before the book was published, the political tenor of the work caused problems. Douwes Dekker was not familiar with contemporary literary circles and had some difficulty in finding a publisher. Eventually he managed to give his manuscript to Jacob van Lennep, a famous writer in the Netherlands at that time. Van Lennep recognized the book as a literary 'masterpiece' but he also realized that the book might well provoke a rebellion in the colonies.

Van Lennep arranged a publisher whilst ensuring that the book would look less like a pamphlet and more like a work of literature, by deleting the actual names of places and characters as well as the dates of the events described. Van Lennep also proposed to leave out the author's explosive closing speech. Multatuli agreed to most of these changes but refused to delete the ending. He handed his manuscript over to van Lennep who sold it to a publisher.

*Max Havelaar* was published in May 1860. Despite van Lennep's changes, the book gave rise to heated debates and was mentioned once in parliament. In the [59] middle of the nineteenth century the Dutch intellectual and political elite showed little interest in the immense archipelago it governed. In general, public debate was dominated by a relatively small group of people that consisted mostly of ministers and the administrative elite. Although there was hardly any state censorship there was not much room for dissident voices. In this climate Multatuli's polemic performance was a shocking novelty. Indeed Multatuli was one of the first to point to the downside of the dual nature of the Dutch colonial rule and the workings of the 'cultuur stelsel' [cultivation system].<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Douwes Dekker was not satisfied with these results, because the publisher did not send enough copies to the Dutch Indies and refused to reprint the book in a cheap edition. He felt that the powers that be managed to cleverly smother the explosive potential of his book by limiting its distribution to their own circle. As a result, Douwes Dekker wanted his book back to find another publisher. In 1860, he sued van Lennep but lost. It was only in 1875 that he regained the copyright and was able to rectify van Lennep's changes. In detailed footnotes Multatuli addressed the many controversies that by then surrounded himself and his book.

## Secondary writings on *Max Havelaar*

From the moment *Max Havelaar* was published, critics grappled with the question why Multatuli used the literary medium to intervene in the public discourse. If the author had meant to write a political pamphlet, why did he use this intricate literary form?

In the first line of reasoning the literary form is regarded as a cloth for the political and biographical facts. The embedded narrator, Stem, uses the metaphor of the smuggler to describe his specific use of the literary medium. He declares that all the literary fireworks he uses are merely a 'meley' and 'a lie', which will serve to cover up the truth he is trying to smuggle inside.<sup>13</sup> In his private correspondence Multatuli sometimes uses similar metaphors when describing this method. He repeatedly states that he wants his public to 'swallow' his bitter message and that he therefore sugarcoated his book with the comical frame-narrative of Drystubble.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that the literary aspect is subordinate to the cause found fertile ground immediately. The contemporary English translator Nahuys, for instance, said '(...) *Max Havelaar* is immortal, not because of literary art or talent, but because of the cause he advocates'.<sup>15</sup> In the twentieth century the events in Lebak became an important episode in the official narrative of Dutch colonial history. Fasseur (1987 and 1992), Van der Doel (1994 and 1997) and Salverda (2007) place Multatuli's Lebakcase in the context of the contemporary practices in the colonial regime.<sup>16</sup> These historians focus on the historical (in)accuracy of the documents that Multatuli included in *Max Havelaar*. [60]

Not all commentators found the statement 'the Javanese are ill-treated' to be as irrefutable as suggested by the author. This scepticism about Multatuli's central proposition started early on. In *Malay Archipelago* (1868), the biologist Alfred Russell Wallace uses a Malthusian

argument to contradict Multatuli. According to Wallace, the Javanese population had not diminished but had grown during the Dutch rule in the nineteenth century, and 'it is universally admitted that when a country is rapidly increasing in population, the people cannot be very greatly oppressed or very badly governed.'<sup>17</sup> From the 1950s onward, Rob Nieuwenhuys introduced a different type of critique. He repeatedly argued that, as a civil servant, Douwes Dekker was not able to judge the colonial situation correctly because he still operated within a 'Eurocentric' framework.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Nieuwenhuys focuses mostly on the conduct of Douwes Dekker in Lebak in 1856; the fact that the Lebakcase was first presented to the world via a literary medium seems to be of secondary importance.

Many studies do not focus solely on Lebak but also on the personality of the author, Douwes Dekker. This is understandable, as the full title *Max Havelaar: Or The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* points to the double nature of the book. This means that the text not only addresses an existing problem (the Javanese people being reduced to 'coffee- and sugar-producing machines') but also describes the character of one man, Max Havelaar, in detail.<sup>19</sup> The authentic documents in *Max Havelaar* make it clear that we can identify the civil servant Max Havelaar as an alter ego of the author. For Multatuli, his personal story and the general issue of colonial rule were not two distinct aspects:

The main thing is and always will be: *to search for the truth, to recognize its importance, and above all, to act on the information which, obtained thus, can be considered true.* All else is wrong, and Holland will lose the Indies because no justice was done to me in my endeavours to protect the Javanese against ill-treatment.<sup>20</sup>

The book is presented as the literal embodiment of the author's suffering. The reader, for instance, is cursed as a man-eater, because he lazily chews on a text that contains the beating heart of the author.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in a footnote Multatuli states: '*This book!.... The reader sees no more in it than that. But to me these pages are a chapter of my life...*'<sup>22</sup>

In order to get to the truth it seems the author wants us again to leave the literary domain; in the end the book is no longer a book, it becomes a human being. This identification between book and man is exactly how contemporary critic H. des Amorie van der Hoeven interprets the book. He places *Max Havelaar* in the confessional tradition, comparing the novel to the work of Rousseau and Saint Augustine. Van der Hoeven argues that Multatuli seamlessly coincides with his book; therefore we do not get to read a *story*, but a human being 'for book and writer are one'.<sup>23</sup> [61]

After Multatuli's death, many of his private letters surfaced and several anecdotes about his private life started to circulate. Multatuli's opponents often used this as ammunition by pointing to the fact that in real life the author did not seamlessly correspond with his self-portrait. This fuelled endless debates on Multatuli's so-called character flaws: his gambling debts, his ill-treatment of wife and children – out of the blue, Douwes Dekker once accused his son of murder –, his Byronesque liaison with his niece. In response, his admirers came up with increasingly elaborate hypotheses to account for the contradictions or gaps in Multatuli's life story.

Many of these debates have little intellectual merit, but on some occasions the discussion became charged with political meaning. Between the first and second World Wars, Multatuli's work was a favourite in Dutch intellectual circles. The influential cultural critic Menno ter Braak and novelist Edgar du Perron found that in Multatuli's work the author's strong personality showed through the text, the hallmark, in their view, of all great literature.<sup>24</sup>

Upholding an ethic of uncompromising individualism in a land of ‘bailiffs’ was one of the main issues for du Perron and ter Braak. In his biography of Multatuli, du Perron states that it is ‘ridiculous’ *not to* take a stand as a biographer: ‘I do not aim for historical objectivity which, when it comes to Multatuli, is always ridiculous and always results in a dull and messy “give and take”. Even if one fully acknowledges Multatuli’s shortcomings – and especially then – he is entitled to our devotion.’<sup>25</sup> Edgar du Perron firmly states that ‘Multatuli is a litmus test, especially when dealing with the Dutch’.<sup>26</sup> After the second World War, many prominent twentieth-century Dutch authors had a similar complex relationship with their national heritage and for that reason they were fascinated by Multatuli’s public *persona*. Jan Wolkers, for instance, typified Douwes Dekker as a ‘a bird of paradise above the potato field’.<sup>27</sup> The influential author W.F. Hermans published a Multatuli biography in 1987 in which he also contrasts the exceptionally gifted Douwes Dekker with the mediocre culture of the Dutch.<sup>28</sup>

The second type of argument states that Multatuli’s use of the literary medium has a political or ideological substance in and of itself, which means that the author’s political views and his writing of literature are considered as two compatible aspects. This line of reasoning became more prominent with the rise of postcolonial studies, which have given an important new impulse to Multatuli studies. It placed the text back in the centre of attention, as postcolonial studies raised awareness of the fact that a literary representation is never neutral but always charged with political and ideological meaning. The focus now was not so much on historical facts but more on the mode of representation employed by Multatuli. The central question has now become: Does the representation of the colonial administration in *Max Havelaar* avoid the usual ideological biases, or does it in fact still suppress the voice of the ‘Other’? [62]

Further to Said’s remark, critics like Anne-Marie Feenberg have argued that ‘(t)he novel strikingly illustrates *avant la lettre* postcolonial theories about colonial psychology and imperialist ideologies.’<sup>29</sup> Feenberg argues that the chosen literary form critiques the imperialist ideology as much as the overt political message of the novel does. E.M. Beekman takes a somewhat different route, but reaches a similar conclusion as Feenberg: he links the dialogical nature of Multatuli’s prose to his politics, using the Bakhtinian notion of ‘heteroglossia’. ‘Everything about *Max Havelaar*,’ says Beekman, ‘indicates that this was the first modern prose text in Dutch that brilliantly used the possibilities of heteroglossia; it was, therefore, a critique not only of political but also of literary orthodoxy.’<sup>30</sup>

Others take this line of reasoning in another direction: they claim Multatuli’s mode of representation was in sync with the imperial and colonial ideology and so was his explicit political body of thought. They point to the fact that, in the novel, neither the female nor the Javanese characters have a fully developed voice; they do not speak but are spoken for.<sup>31</sup> Multatuli’s depiction of his own suffering also led to critical scrutiny. C.H. Niekerk claims that ‘his philosophy of more rights for the natives and his identification with the poor ultimately serve only the purpose of acquiring justice for himself (...).’<sup>32</sup> D.C. Zook states that Multatuli’s literature is not as innovative as suggested by critics like Beekman and that Multatuli’s belief in a recognizable truth makes him more of a conservative than a writer ahead of his own time. Zook sums up his line of reasoning: ‘What is clear from the reception of the novel, from Multatuli’s acts while in the Indies, and from the text of the novel itself is that *Max Havelaar* is not an anti-colonial or anti-imperial novel.’<sup>33</sup>

The third argument states the exact opposite of the first one: Multatuli used a current political topic to gain the audience’s attention, but what really got ‘smuggled’ inside was his

subversive literature. This argument is the least popular one as in its purest form it has been defended by just one critic: D. H. Lawrence. He argues that:

It was a stroke of cunning journalism on Multatuli's part (...) to put his book through on its face value as a tract. What Multatuli really wanted was his book to get over (...) I want to be heard! I will be heard! he vociferates on the last pages. He himself must have laughed in his sleeve as he vociferated. But the public gaped and fell for it.

He was the passionate missionary for the poor Javanese! Because he knew missionaries were, and are, listened to! And the Javanese were a good stick with which to beat the dog. The successful public being the dog. Which dog he longed to beat. To give it the trouncing of its life! (...). This book really isn't a tract, it's a satire.<sup>34</sup> [63]

Although Lawrence's views are not widely held, his reading is not far-fetched. It is in his second novel, *Minnebrieven* [*Loveletters*, 1861], that the idea that Multatuli longs to beat his public hits home: he literally describes a scene in which he whips 'Mr. Public'.<sup>35</sup> And what should we make of a smuggler who is honest enough to reveal the very thing (i.e. the truth) that he is trying to smuggle inside? Only an author who 'laughed in his sleeve' is in fact a real smuggler.

Lawrence's views of Multatuli link in seamlessly with Multatuli's own views of Cervantes. Multatuli objects to the idea that Cervantes intended to write a tract warning against the dangers of reading too many novels. He complains about the 'tendency to lower such a beautiful satire to a *commonplace* discussion.' Multatuli proceeds to argue that Cervantes, the novel *Don Quixote* and the hero of the novel (Quixote) are one and the same, for they all suffer the same fate: their spiritual nobility is abused and misunderstood in a worldly context.<sup>36</sup> Given the fact that Multatuli compares his alter ego Max Havelaar to Don Quixote, it does not seem far-fetched to link Multatuli's remark about Cervantes's 'beautiful satire' to his own work. The literary genre of the satire aims at something much higher than the tract but this is bound to be misunderstood by the public – who therefore deserve a trouncing.

## The Liar's Paradox

The variety of readings of the text has of course something to do with the different theoretical approaches of the critics. In some ways, the debate about *Max Havelaar* echoes the debate about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which also focuses on the issue whether the story is actually a critique of racism or whether it is based on a fundamentally racist perspective.<sup>37</sup> However, it would be hard to imagine anyone arguing that Conrad 'laughed in his sleeve' because he secretly wrote a satire, whereas in the case of Multatuli this reading is not implausible.

The difference lies in the self-reflexive aspect of *Max Havelaar*. The book is as much about the act of writing as it is about colonial government. Or to put it more precisely: the book addresses the *relationship* between politics and writing. To understand Multatuli's position in *Max Havelaar* better, I will take a detour through his later work, in which he goes on to depict the act of writing as something inherently problematic.

Although not addressed in the secondary literature until now, Multatuli's critique of the written word has much in common with Rousseau's cultural criticism.<sup>38</sup> In subsequent and more philosophical work Multatuli defines 'truth' as the immediate presence of spontaneous life which he calls 'Nature'. He states that it is impossible for humans to ever reach this pure

state of truthfulness but it should be their goal to always aim for it.<sup>39</sup> However, the predominance of the written word in western civilization severely undermines this effort. Multatuli associates writing with artificiality and double-sidedness and it therefore inherently [64] hinders this pursuit of truth<sup>40</sup> This means that he has to invent a whole new type of authorship, one that is able to overcome the evils of writing.

This explains why he says time and again: ‘I am not a writer – do believe me, gentlemen scribblers who are determined to see a colleague and a competitor in me!’<sup>41</sup> Writers just skillfully cover up the soullessness of their texts and therefore their work is in essence always untruthful, even though it may contain statements that are true. Multatuli marks himself as different, as he strives to write with frankness, in an authentic and spontaneous language that is filled with the living presence of his soul. He admits that, compared to the work of the ‘gentlemen scribblers’, his writings are ‘chaotic’ and ‘disjointed’ but this lack of perfection is merely a testimony to his attempt at writing truthfully. According to Multatuli, writers lull their audience to sleep with their hollow words about God, patriotism, virtue, love and chastity – but conversely the audience mindlessly swallows everything. ‘Mr. Public’s’ lack of soul is mirrored in the soullessness of the writings of the day.

When we return to *Max Havelaar*, we see that his ideas about the evils of writing are also present in this novel and it throws an interesting light on Multatuli’s depiction of colonial rule. The Dutch regime was truly an administrative regime: a handful of Dutch civil servants governed an enormous archipelago. These civil servants had to rely to an important extent on written reports and they gave and received orders by letter. Everyone within the administrative hierarchy wanted to write favourable reports to their superiors because this increased the chance of promotion.<sup>42</sup> This had ‘given birth to an artificial optimism in the official and written treatment of affairs’, even though the facts these same reports produced clearly contradicted this optimism.<sup>43</sup> The official narrative was that all was well – the novel quotes an official report which stated that ‘peace has remained peaceful’<sup>44</sup> – and it did not matter that individually everyone within the system knew this narrative to be untrue.<sup>45</sup>

Multatuli warns his Dutch readers that this ‘absurd optimism’ can only end in violence and revolt, just like it did in India<sup>47</sup>, but violence is not the root of the problem. This makes *Max Havelaar* different from *Heart of Darkness*, in which the uncontrolled sadistic brutality of the system causes the misery. *Max Havelaar* depicts a system that has elevated small-minded and empty administrative formulae into the only acceptable representation of reality.

Havelaar is a very different type of civil servant: justice and truth are not some empty concepts for him but a heartfelt matter. The novel underlines that Havelaar is not afraid to write reports that address painful issues in a roundabout way. His writing is free of the usual official formulae but instead full of a lifelike presence:

He had too much soul to drown his thought in the ‘I-have-the-honours’ and the ‘noble-severities’ and the ‘respectfully-submitted-for-considerations’ which are the delight of the little world he moved in. When he writes, something [65] goes through you, reader, it makes you feel that real clouds are driving across the sky during that thunderstorm, and that it is not merely the rattle of tin stage-thunder which you hear! When he strikes fire from his ideas, you feel the heat of that fire, unless you are a born pen pusher (...).<sup>46</sup>

Despite his gift for rhetoric, Havelaar does not succeed in his attempt to bring the truth to light. His different style only makes him an eccentric in the eyes of his superiors and this means his statements can easily be brushed off as highly exaggerated.

This explains the contradictory interpretations of Multatuli's political position as he is labelled both a conservative and a colonial iconoclast.<sup>48</sup> For Multatuli the political direction of the colonial regime was not the real issue. He never claims that his goal is to end Dutch colonial rule. Nor does he aim for a reform of the colonial government and although it is clear he protests against the abuse of the Javanese people, he does not formulate a fully-fledged 'philosophy of more rights for the natives', as Zook stated. Multatuli merely demands that the existing law be implemented. This may seem a very modest proposal but he was well aware that if this were to happen, it would mean 'a death sentence for most of our politicians'.<sup>49</sup> The real problem is that the law was a dead letter and the poetic fire of a man like Havelaar was needed to bring it back to life. As long as the 'pen pushers' made political and administrative careers and Havelaar was considered a madman, no reform of the law or administrative ruling could bring about real change.

This, however, is not the final reading of the relationship between writing and politics in *Max Havelaar*. Time and again Havelaar has been compared to Don Quixote. As a young boy Havelaar once bravely came to the rescue of Drystubble, who got caught up in a fight. That morning in school they had read about Scaevola's heroic act of friendship. All the other schoolboys found the story of Scaevola beautiful but in real life they stood by and watched Drystubble getting a beating. Havelaar, on the other hand, immediately steps forward but ends up receiving a trouncing himself while Drystubble quietly escapes. There are multiple inter-textual layers in this anecdote as it does not only mirror the narrative structure of *Don Quixote*, but also the first book of Rousseau's *Confessions* in which Rousseau describes the formative experience of reading in early childhood. While reading Plutarch he claims to have identified so strongly with Scaevola that he put his hand on a small burning stove.

Apparently heroism starts with reading. Havelaar's spiritual fire does not stem from an immediately experienced reality but is mediated through books. Moreover, the *framing* of Havelaar as a Don Quixote-like character can only be achieved through this deliberate intertextual play, which demands a way of writing that is far from spontaneous or naïve. Multatuli was well aware of this problem; in fact, in his next novel *Loveletters* he openly alludes to the Cretan paradox and plays with [66] the possibility that maybe he is a liar like any other writer.<sup>50</sup> Except that, of course, since he speaks the truth about being a liar, we are left with an unsolvable paradox.

This means that Multatuli deliberately foregrounds the fact that he cannot step out of the problem of the written word, but is caught up in it. And it is by doubling the text in inter-texts that are also reflexive (Cervantes and Rousseau) that this primary presence of literature is addressed.

## Conclusion

The recurring question for commentators on *Max Havelaar* is: if the author had meant to write a political pamphlet, why did he use such an intricate literary form? In my reading, I have stressed two thus far under-exposed aspects. The first one concerns his critique of the colonial regime, which is first and foremost a critique of the administrative character of the government; it is the written word that lies at the heart of the problem. The second aspect shows that the novel deliberately alludes to a self-reflexive literary tradition.

In conclusion, I would like to formulate a new answer to this recurring question. On the one hand, the literary form endangers the political message of the book. Multatuli demands that his audience not treat his book as an artificial construction but like a mother crying for help. However, it is not easy to fill a dead letter with life – this sense of immediacy requires great literary skills. He therefore has to use artificial means and consequently it is always possible for the reader to put *Max Havelaar* at a reflexive distance and to treat Multatuli as a writer, even though he repeatedly declares: ‘I am not a writer’. The use of the literary form is unavoidable but at the same time it threatens to undermine his whole argument.

However, this quest for a speech that is immediate and filled with a soulful presence originates from literature, not from reality. Without the literary figure Don Quixote, there could be no Havelaar. Seen from this perspective, the reflexivity of literature does not endanger political action but on the contrary makes it possible.

I think it is not fruitful to try and resolve this ambiguity and to ascribe a welldefined political program to Multatuli, for it is this indecisiveness that makes him such a relevant case for postcolonial studies. Multatuli’s representation of the colonial regime cannot be separated from his ambivalent relationship to the written word. This means that in *Max Havelaar* literature is not presented as a ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ medium. Instead, it highlights the fact that the written medium is caught up in a problem it should be able to bring to light. Although the novel presents a case that on the surface seems only to be relevant in the context of Dutch history, the opposite is true. *Max Havelaar* is not unambiguously anti-imperialist or anti-colonial, but it does demonstrate the extreme difficulty of getting beyond accepted modes of representation, and the ideologies that are part of [67] these representational regimes. In other words: the novel touches on one of the most important insights of postcolonial studies.

## Notes

- \* I wish to thank Geert Buelens, Gaston Franssen and Imke de Gier, as well as others who read the article before publication, for their comments and helpful advice.
1. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*, trans. by Roy Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 318.
  2. Konstantin Paustovsky’s admiration for Multatuli was important for Multatuli’s reception in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. See Konstantin Paustovsky, *The Golden Rose* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003), pp. 27-30.
  3. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 47 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 39, p. 445, p. 447, p. 460.
  4. Benedict Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons. Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (Verso: London / New York, 2002), p. 87. See also Benedict Anderson, *Max Havelaar (Multatuli 1860)*, Franco Moretti, *The Novel. Volume 2: Forms and Themes* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 449-462. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, ‘The Book That Killed Colonialism’, *New York Times Magazine*, 18 April 1999, pp. 112-114.
  5. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 240.
  6. In ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1886-1939), XIX (1923-1925), p. 168, Freud states: ‘There is little to be said against the Dutch writer Multatuli when he replaces the [moira] [fate] of the Greeks by the divine pair Λογος and Αναγκη [necessity and reason], but all who would

transfer the guidance of the world to Providence, to God, or to God and Nature, arouse a suspicion that they still look upon these ultimate and remotest powers as a parental couple, in a mythological sense, and believe themselves linked to them by libidinal ties.' He also refers to Multatuli's 'twin gods Λογος and Αναγκη' in a footnote in 'The Future of an Illusion' (Freud, Standard Edition, p. 21. Freud also commented on Multatuli's view on adolescence in Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Enlightenment of Children (An Open Letter to Dr. M. Fürst)', Freud, Standard Edition, pp. 129-140.

7. See for instance Multatuli, *Minnebrieven, Volledige Werken*, ed. by G. Stuiveling, H. Van den Berg and D. Van der Meulen, 25 vols (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1950-1955), II, p. 103.
8. D.H. Lawrence, 'Preface' in Multatuli, Max Havelaar, trans. by W. Siebenhaar (New York, 1927), repr. in *The Cambridge Edition of the works of D. H. Lawrence. Introductions and Reviews*, ed. by N.H. Reeve and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 79-84.
9. For a concise overview of the historical events in Lebak and the fabric of the Dutch colonial system, see R.P. Meijer, 'Introduction', Multatuli, Max Havelaar: Or The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company, trans. by Roy Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 1-13.
10. Multatuli, Max Havelaar: Or The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company, trans. by Roy Edwards (London: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 45-50. [68]
11. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 104.
12. One of the few exceptions was P.J. Veth who was the first Dutch academic to study the history and culture of the Dutch Indies. See Paul van der Velde, *Een Indische liefde. P.J. Veth (1814 -1895) en de inburgering van Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2000).
13. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 236.
14. Multatuli to Van Lennep, 10 January 1860, *Verzamelde Werken*, X, p. 187.
15. A. Nahuys, 'Preface', Multatuli, Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company, trans. by A. Nahuys. (Edinburgh, 1868), p. viii.
16. H.W. van den Doel, *Het Rijk van Insulinde. Opkomst en ondergang van een Nederlandse kolonie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Prometheus, 1996); H.W. van den Doel, 'Over "brooddronkene vazige regenten" en andere ambtenaren', *Over Multatuli* 33 (1994), pp. 3-29; C. Fasseur, *The politics of colonial exploitation: Java, the Dutch, and the cultivation system*, trans. by R.E. Elson and Ary Kraal, (Cornell, 1992), 2nd ed., *Studies on Southeast Asia* no. 8; C. Fasseur, *Onhoorbaar groeit de padi: Max Havelaar en de publieke zaak* (Amsterdam: Huis aan de drie grachten, 1987); R. Salverda, "'For Justice And Humanity" Multatuli and Pramoedya Ananta Toer – Dutch-Indonesian Literary, Historical and Political Connections', ed. by Thomas F. Shannon and Johan P. Snapper, *Dutch Literature and Culture in an Age of Transition. The Berkeley Conference on Dutch Literature 2005* (Münster: Nodus, 2007), pp. 121-140.
17. A.R. Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-Utan, and the Bird of Paradise. A Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature*. First published 1869 (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 108.
18. Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Oost-Indische spiegel. Wat Nederlandse schrijvers en dichters over Indonesië hebben geschreven vanaf de eerste jaren der Compagnie tot op heden* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1978), p. 601: 'Als men de werking van Dekkers bestuursdaden in verband brengt met de patrimoniale structuur van de samenleving in Bantam – het gebied dat Dekker te besturen kreeg – dan voert dit tot

de conclusie dat Dekker, gevangen door een typisch westerse denkwijze en door zijn romantisch temperament geleid, ernstige beleidsfouten heeft gemaakt.' Also: Rob Nieuwenhuys, *De mythe van Lebak* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1987).

19. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 279.
20. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 326.
21. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 134.
22. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 321.
23. 'Max Havelaar is Multatuli in den stelligsten zin des woords, waar Gij het boek opent, ligt ook de ziel van de schrijver geopend voor U; want boek en schrijver zijn één. (...) (i) n de bekentenissen van Augustinus als in die van Rousseau, in Bunijan's Reize naar de Eeuwigheid, in Pascal's gedachten, in Byron's Childe Harold (...) worden ons geen verhalen te lezen gegeven, maar menschen – en dat is de éénige lectuur waarvan de denkende lezer nooit verzadigd wordt.'; ['There is no doubt that Max Havelaar is Multatuli, and when you open the book, you can look directly into the writer's soul, because book and writer are one. (...) in Rousseau's Confessions, in Bunijan's The Pilgrim's Progress, in Pascals Thoughts, in Byron's Childe Harold (...) the reader is not offered a story, but a human being – and that is the only reading matter the thoughtful reader will never get tired of.' Trans. by Saskia Pieterse] H. des Amorie van der Hoeven, 'Multatuli's Grieven' [69] *Bataviaasch Handelsblad* 85, Wednesday 24 October (1860). Reprinted as inset in W. F. Hermans, *De raadselachtige Multatuli* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1987).
24. Ter Braak argues that literature should be an encounter with a 'fellow', a strong man. Menno ter Braak, 'Prisma of dogma', ed. by M. van Crevel and others, *Verzameld werk Menno ter Braak*, 7 vols (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1949-1951), I, p. 355. Regarding ter Braak on Multatuli see M. ter Braak, 'Douwes Dekker en Multatuli'. *De vrije bladen* 14 (1937), schrift iv.
25. Trans. by Saskia Pieterse. The original reads: 'Ik heb mij niet (...) toegelegd op een, tegenover hem altijd ridikule, zogenaamd historische onpartijdigheid, die altijd op een laf knoeiwerkje van "geven en nemen" neerkomt. Ook als men zijn gebreken volmondig erkent, juist dan, heeft hij recht op iedere toewijding.' E. du Perron, *De man van Lebak Anekdoten en dokumenten betreffende Multatuli* bijeengebracht en gekommenteerd door E. du Perron (Amsterdam: Querido, 1937), p. 13.
26. Trans. by Saskia Pieterse. The original reads: 'Multatuli is (...) een steekproef, in het bijzonder bij Hollanders', Du Perron, *De man van Lebak*, p. 28.
27. Trans. by Saskia Pieterse. The original reads: 'paradijsvogel boven het aardappelloof'. Jan Wolkers, *Een paradijsvogel boven het aardappelloof* (Breda: De Geus, 1987).
28. W.F. Hermans, *De raadselachtige Multatuli* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1987).
29. Anne-Marie Feenberg, 'Max Havelaar: An Anti-Imperialist Novel', *Modern Language Notes*, 112, nr. 2 (1997), pp. 817 – 835. See also R. Salverda, 'The case of the missing empire, or the continuing relevance of Multatuli's novel Max Havelaar (1860)', *European Review*, 12, nr. 1 (2005) pp. 127-138.
30. E. M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies 1600-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996), p. 229.
31. J. Gera, *Van een afstand. Multatuli's Max Havelaar tegendraads gelezen* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: L.J. Veen, 2001).

32. C. H. Niekerk, 'Race and Gender in Multatuli's Max Havelaar and Love Letters', ed. by M.C. Finke and C.H. Niekerk, *One Hundred Years of Masochism. Literary Texts, Social and Cultural Contexts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 186.
33. D. C. Zook, 'Searching for Max Havelaar: Multatuli, Colonial History, and the Confusion of Empire' *Modern Language Notes*, 121, nr. 5 (2006), pp. 1169-1189.
34. Lawrence, 'Preface', pp. 82-3.
35. Multatuli, *Minnebrieven, Verzamelde Werken*, II, p. 22.
36. Cervantes shows us in *Don Quixote*: 'hoe de wereld zielenadel bestrydt, en wat er geleeden wordt door de onnoozelen die dit niet weten. Het geheel is één kreet van smart, waaraan we dan ook den humor te danken hebben, die 't doortintelt.' (...) De neiging om zoo'n prachtige satire te verlagen tot 'n commonplace verhandeling van polemische strekking, is karakteristiek-kranterig. De goede Cervantes heeft geen zegen op z'n werk. Nog altyd deelt het in de wederwaardigheden van de held, d.i. van den auteur, want hy wàs het!' ['how the world fights nobility of spirit, and how the fools that do not know this suffer. The novel as a whole cries with pain, and we owe the humour that tingles through the work to this. The tendency to lower such a beautiful satire to a commonplace and polemical discussion, is a typical journalistic character trade. The work of the good Cervantes has not been blessed. The novel still shares the same faith [70] as the hero, or in other words the author – for he [Cervantes] was it [the hero]' Trans. by Saskia Pieterse]. *Multatuli, Verzamelde Werken III*, p. 548.
37. The most influential readings of *Heart of Darkness* are; Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"', *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977) rep. in *Heart of Darkness, An Authoritative Text, background and Sources Criticism*, ed. by Robert Kimbrough (London: W. W Norton and Co., 1988), 3rd ed., pp. 251-261; Edward Said, 'Two Visions in Heart of Darkness', *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 22-31; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline. The Wellek Library Lectures Series* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
38. For Rousseau's ideas about language and origin see J. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: la transparence et l'obstacle. Suivi de sept essais sur Rousseau*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 356-379.
39. See for instance Multatuli, *Verzamelde Werken*, III, p. 292.
40. Saskia Pieterse, *De buik van de lezer. Over spreken en schrijven in Multatuli's Ideën* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008), p. 109.
41. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 323.
42. 'The Government of the Dutch East Indies likes to write and tell its masters in the Motherland that everything is going well. The Residents like to report this to the Government, The Assistant Residents, who in turn receive hardly anything but favourable reports from their Controleurs, who also prefer not to send any disagreeable news to the Residents.' Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 211.
43. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 211.
44. Multatuli quotes an existing report, see Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 212.
45. '(...) the official reports from the civil servants to the Government (...) are mostly and for the most important part untrue'. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, pp. 212-213.
46. Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 236.
47. Multatuli compares India and the Dutch Indies, Multatuli, *Max Havelaar*, p. 213.

48. Several political historians have attempted to qualify Douwes Dekker's political life in terms of an already existing political movement. As with the interpretations of Max Havelaar, the variety in the outcome is telling. He has been linked with both the conservative and the early socialist movement in the Netherlands. Wessel Krul, 'Multatuli en Busken Huët als critici van de democratie. Rondom de politieke crisis van 1867', ed. by D. Pels en H. te Velde, *Politieke stijl: over presentatie en optreden in de politiek* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2000), pp. 129-150; R. van Raak, *In naam van het volmaakte. Conservatisme in Nederland in de negentiende eeuw van Gerrit Jan Mulder tot Jan Heemskeek Azn.* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2001), pp. 149-158; Dennis Bos "'Klaas Ris de molenaarsknecht' en 'den groote, geniaale Multatuli'" *Over Multatuli* 44 (2000), pp. 2-18; Dennis Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden: de vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam, 1848-1894* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001).
49. Multatuli, Max Havelaar, p. 324. The complete context reads: 'The partly incapable, partly not very honest small bunch of politicians that 'fell upwards through lack of weight' after '60 realized that something had to be done, although they preferred not to do the right thing which, if it comes to that – I can see their point there! – would have been tantamount to suicide. Justice for the ill-treated Javanese would have meant elevating him; and that would have been a death sentence for most of our politicians. [71] Nevertheless, they had to be seen to be engaged in a new direction, and the People (...) had a succession of bones thrown to them, not really to appease their hunger for reform but to keep their jaws busy (...).'
50. '...je ne sais comment j'appris à lire; je ne me souviens que de mes premières lectures et de leur effet sur moi: c'est le temps d'où je date sans interruption la conscience de moi-même. (...) je devenois le personnage dont je lisois la vie: le récit des traits de constance et d'intrépidité qui m'avoient frappé me rendoit les yeux étincellants et la voix forte. Un jour que je racontois à table l'aventure de Scaevola, on fut effrayé de me voir avancer et tenir la main sur un réchaud pour représenter son action.' Rousseau, J. J., 'Confessions', *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-95), vol. 1 (1959), pp. 5-656. ['I recollect nothing of learning to read, I only remember what effect the first considerable exercise of it produced on my mind; and from that moment I date an uninterrupted knowledge of myself. (...) I could (...) readily give into the character of the personage whose life I read; transported by the recital of any extraordinary instance of fortitude or intrepidity, animation flashed from my eyes, and gave my voice additional strength and energy. One day, at table, while relating the fortitude of Scaevola, they were terrified at seeing me start from my seat and hold my hand over a hot chafing – dish, to represent more forcibly the action of that determined Roman.' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (translation Angela Scholar), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200), p. 8, 9.]

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