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Geestelijke lenigheid. De relatie tussen literatuur en natuurwetenschap in het werk van Frederik van Eeden en Felix Ortt, 1880-1930

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2010

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Vermeer, L. (2010). *Geestelijke lenigheid. De relatie tussen literatuur en natuurwetenschap in het werk van Frederik van Eeden en Felix Ortt, 1880-1930*. s.n.

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English summary

Mental Sinuosity

*The Relationship between Literature and Science
in the Works of Frederik van Eeden and Felix Ortt, 1880-1930*

This present study focuses on the relationship between literature and science, in particular on the incorporation of natural scientific ideas in the works of two Dutch fin de siècle authors: Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932) and Felix Ortt (1866-1959). In the course of the nineteenth century literature and science gradually developed into autonomous domains with their own professional institutions and codes of conduct. This autonomy, however, was rather relative. For whenever the actual production and circulation of knowledge was at stake, science and literature remained firmly connected. The central issue in this study concerns the way in which the exchange of knowledge between literature and science took shape at a time in which these domains separated on an institutional level. The discursive connections between literature and science, as well as the tensions that possibly resulted with regard to the process of autonomisation, can best be comprehended by looking at individuals who were active in both domains. Therefore this study concentrates on the life and works of Ortt and Van Eeden.

Van Eeden and Ortt both received a scientific education. Van Eeden had a doctoral degree in medicine and was a well-known psychiatrist. Ortt was an engineer at Rijkswaterstaat (the Department of Waterways and Public Works), although he resigned in 1899 because of his anarchistic ideas. They were well versed in the natural sciences, (para)psychology, philosophy, religion, occultism, and the important issues of their time, such as the social problems and the emancipation of women. This study is primarily concerned with the literary incorporation of *natural* scientific knowledge. This particular focus can enhance the understanding of the process of autonomisation and the related discussion on the 'two cultures'. It was in the decades around 1900 that the division between the natural sciences and the humanities – and the social sciences as 'third culture' in between – took place.

C.P. Snow's 1959 lecture on the 'two cultures' has been both a blessing and a curse. The heated discussion that followed put the 'Literature and Science Studies', which came into being in the United States from 1939 onwards, really on the map. At the same time the discussion – and its previous history – left this field with a questionable legacy. This legacy poses literature and science as opposites by way of attributing essential characteristics to each of them, such as subjectivity versus objectivity. Although the notion of an unbridgeable gulf between the two cultures is still alive today, the field of 'Literature and Science' has tried to leave this view behind. Instead, the relationship between literature and science is being seen as dynamical and mutual. This consensus masks however, especially in the case of Dutch literature, that there is lack of methodological reflection on how to study this

interaction. This present study aims to contribute to such a reflection and at the same time connect these insights to specific historical cases. These historical case studies highlight the literary perspective, as part of the complex interaction between literature, science and culture.

Useful methodological concepts can be found in discourse analysis and the history and sociology of science. The notions of discourse and interdiscursivity clarify both the specificity and the connections between domains of knowledge. Metaphors, reasoning patterns, myths and ideologies are important aspects with regard to interdiscursivity. In the past decades several historians and sociologists of science have shown that science can be seen as a discursive and cultural practice – not much different from literature, in that respect. Their notion of a circulation of knowledge strokes with my interpretation of interdiscursivity: both concepts describe the dynamic and creative process of the transformation of knowledge as soon as it moves to another discourse. In each discourse knowledge is transformed depending on the prevailing codes of conduct and the possibilities for renewal therein.

The core of the book consists of three chapters in which this transformation process has been analysed in the works of Van Eeden and Ortt. Each chapter is concerned with a specific scientific field: evolutionary theory, thermodynamics and mathematics. In the analysis of fiction (novels, poetry, plays), essayistic texts and ‘egodocuments’ (diaries, letters) the shared knowledge between writers and scientists as well as the specific ‘literary’ turn has been put forward. The capacity of the writers to connect the most diverging scientific theories and ideas with their own ideological preoccupations is a phenomenon which I have called ‘mental sinuosity’. The condition for these sinuous interpretations was the broad spectrum of connotations in (popular) science itself. For example in the works of Van Eeden and Ortt we can detect several ways of escape from the mechanistic, Darwinist universe. The authors’ interpretation of evolution had a strong moral, metaphysical and utopian component. The connotations of evolution they incorporated, such as moral progression, were readily available in several evolutionary theories around 1900, darwinian and anti-darwinian alike. Van Eeden and Ortt’s interpretation drew from but also added to this reservoir of meanings. It shows the impossibility of defining a clear source (science) and receiver (literature), because knowledge keeps circulating and transforming on its way. Such ‘circulation stories’ are relevant for both the history of literature and the history of science as well

The present study not only quotes several ‘circulation stories’, but also aims to clarify how references and allusions to science function in literary works. With regard to the focus of this study the ‘interdiscursive’ function has been highlighted. Important functions in this respect were popularisation, anticipation, integration and transgression. The most important function that came forward from the textual analysis was the ideological one. The authors used scientific knowledge to underpin their specific world view. Their whole way of thinking was based on the conviction that in the near future a new era with a better, spiritualized mankind was to come. Van Eeden and Ortt were certain that some characteristics of this ‘New Man’ were already visible, not in the least in their own persons. Although their scientific argumentation of this idea changed over time, the message itself stayed pretty much the same. Therefore it

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could be argued that their mental sinuosity went hand in hand with a certain ideological stiffness. Besides the explicit ideological layer, more implicit ideologies – in the sense of conventions that were so obvious that they often were not even mentioned – could also be inferred from the studied texts. The presence of these self-evident ideas could lead to several contradictions. For example, the simultaneous attendance of two opposed discourses, such as the vitalist and the mechanist discourse, led to ambiguous notions such as ‘vital energy’.

A function which hitherto has been neglected in the study of the incorporation of scientific knowledge in literary texts was the literary-strategic function. This function was exemplified in the fifth, biographical-institutional chapter in which it became clear that Van Eeden and Ortt used science in order to underline their autonomous poetics (‘art for art’s sake’). Science functioned for them as a frame of reference for accentuating the specific quality of literature. This hierarchical classification – literature on a pedestal, above everything else – did not determine their daily practice however. Their everyday lives can best be described, in Van Eeden’s own terms, as a ‘mental wandering’ in which literature, science and a whole range of other activities were combined. Their refusal to specialize themselves forms part of the explanation for the ambivalent reception of their works. The autonomous poetics allowed the incorporation of heteronomous elements – such as scientific or ethical ideas –, but only under the condition that these elements were subordinated to the literary codes of conduct. Although literary critics and authors alike shared this poetic assumption, they did not agree on the way this should be effectuated.

Van Eeden and Ortt aspired to be autonomous writers and versatile, engaged ‘mental wanderers’ at the same time. That this aroused tensions shows us firstly that the autonomy of the literary and the scientific domain was indeed progressing. Furthermore, as the writers tried to cope with these tensions they turned out to become exponents of a new social figure: the modern intellectual who in the name of his specific capacity as ‘Poet’ intervenes outside his literary territory. Their search for a new, unifying ideal was an attempt to solve one urgent dilemma of modernity: the disintegration of society into fragmented, machine-like parts. In this attempt one can detect the typical combination of cultural criticism and utopian idealism of the Dutch fin de siècle.