





The struggle for life

Virginie Loveling

1836-1923

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ODDLY ENOUGH, VIRGINIE LOVELING'S most modern work is also her least well-known. The Flemish writer is more often associated with the poetry and novels she wrote in the nineteenth century than with the works colored by evolution theory that appeared around 1900. Loveling is known mainly for her first collection *Gedichten* (Poems), which she published jointly with her sister Rosalie in the Netherlands in 1870, her volumes of novellas, her political novels *In onze Vlaamsche Gewesten* (In This Flanders of Ours, 1877) and *Sophie* (1885), or the novel *Een dure Eed* (A Costly Oath, 1891), for which she was awarded the Five-Yearly Prize for Dutch Literature in 1895. Both Flemish and Dutch critics enthused about the *Gedichten* because of the way their sober style, acute observation and somber, melancholy content broke with older romantic poetry. The anticlerical *Sophie* was praised by the Dutch naturalist Frans Netscher in a letter to the poet Albert Verwey as "the best prose work written in the Low Countries in recent years".

Loveling is regarded as an intellectual prodigy because she was able to carve out a literary career for herself at a time when women's education was fairly rudimentary. Loveling herself lacked a thorough educational grounding, but was able to take full advantage of the fund of knowledge within her liberal, intellectual family, from which her view of men and women issues. For example, she produces a subtle critique of the evolutionary ideas that were in vogue in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Although it is not certain that Loveling had read Darwin's work in the original, she was undoubtedly familiar with his ideas - not only because they were part of the intellectual baggage of large numbers of nineteenth-century intellectuals, but principally because she was a close friend of many Flemish scientists who had made a thorough study of evolution theory.

In the novella *Meesterschap* (Mastery, 1898) and the novels *Erfelijk belast* (A Victim of Heredity, 1906) and *Een revolverschot* (A Revolver Shot, 1911), evolutionary influences in particular, such as heredity and atavism, are apparent, but in *Het Lot der Kinderen* (Childrens' Lot, 1906) and an older work like 'De kwellende gedachte' (The Agonising Thought, 1874) or *Een Idylle* (An Idyll, 1893) Darwinian mechanisms also play a part. Loveling speaks of the "great, cruel, gruesome struggle for happiness in life, a life-and-death struggle" (*Een revolverschot*). In *Erfelijk belast* she emphasizes the importance of one's hereditary history and the controlling influence of one's ancestors:

She closed her eyes; slumber enveloped her in its downy arms, a slumber in which she remained awake and aware, and gradually a vague memory arose in her, telling her that what she was enduring now, and what had seemed new to her, was not new, that everything came from far, far... from very far away... ; that others before her, to whom she was inescapably linked by natural bonds, had also felt it, and that it was a legacy from them... and that in the mists of the future before her... there might ... be more such blissful numbing thoughts...

According to Darwin, men were brave, combative and forceful, and women intrinsically soft, intuitive and maternal, as he wrote in *The Descent of Man*, in line with the prejudices and Victorian norms of his time. Loveling agreed with Darwin to a considerable extent on the male and female psyche. In her work, men strive for dominance and power and many women are characterized as caring and sensitive.

However, in crucial areas she diverges from that traditional role pattern. Men and women are equally susceptible to congenital madness or hysterical fits. When the father and daughter learn in 'De kwellende gedachte' that their son-in-law and future husband has been killed, the father falls "into helpless despondency, tearing his hair out", while "Césarine stood as motionless as a statue in the devastating realization that the ultimate, most dreadful of disasters had befallen her."

Another striking feature is the stress laid by Loveling on men's ability to assume tasks as carers. In her work, 'caring' is represented as a complex learning process instead of an innate female quality. In *Een Idylle* it is Guido who looks after his father at the end of his life:

He sat all night by the bedside. He would not allow the Brother of Charity who had been summoned to touch the patient except to provide supplementary help. He himself lifted him up in his strong arms and brought the refreshing glass to his helpless, twisted lips. There was so much bottled-up and still suppressed tenderness, so much remorse in his sudden, impulsive, rather wild devotion.

Moreover, in *Een Idylle* Loveling calls it a natural female urge to strive for dominance in the household and argues that many men concur with this:

Her heart had remained free and the need for command and dominance, which plays such a powerful role in inducing young girls of a certain age to get married, had been satisfied in her even before it had been felt. She was mistress of the house and her father deferred to her wishes.

Loveling's view of women is more complex than Darwin's. She refuses to see women solely in their role as spouses, daughters or carers. The writer stresses the fascination for science felt by a number of women and argues that they can achieve the same intellectual standard as men. The struggle for life refers not only to the struggle for food, space or power. In Darwin's view the fight for survival also implies a search for the right partner in order to maximize

the chance of healthy progeny. He discovered that in many animal species the females select the males. Authors like George Eliot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner emphasize that aspect of Darwinian theory in their feminist reworking of traditional romantic plots. Yet all in all that choice is limited. The female partner can either refuse or accept a suitor for her favor, but cannot herself go in search of a partner. As is now generally accepted in evolutionary biology, women also struggle with each other in the process of sexual selection. In Loveling's *Een revolverschot*, Marie and her sister Georgine both try to win the heart of Luc Hancq, the man of their dreams, through their appearance, a struggle that in Marie's case is driven by a primitive, unreasoning force:

She was on the point of ripping the bodice open, trampling the lace shawl – which she had pulled from her shoulders – underfoot, in the painful conviction that art is useless if nature will not lend a hand. Why not give up the struggle, concede defeat? Why try to doll up a skeleton, competing with Georgine. The tall, beautiful, hated Georgine! [...] And while Marie clearly saw how pathetic and ludicrous her recent behaviour was, a stronger, unreasoning, detestable power drove her to pick up the shawl, tie it in an elegant knot, stick a gold pin in it and put gold bracelets round her skinny wrists.

In addition, Darwin writes in the *Descent of Man*, every female organism will in any case choose a male partner, even if it is the one least to her taste. *Een revolverschot* highlights the attendant risks if that rule is disobeyed. Marie does not succeed in marrying the man of her dreams and meanwhile rejects other candidates. When she becomes insane at the end of the novel, it seems to be a punishment for her deliberate refusal to choose another candidate as a husband.

The novel may have a stereotypical ending, in which there is no chance of self-fulfilment for women, but it can also be seen as a covert critique of the social restrictions and demands imposed on women. Although Marie finally realizes the suffering into which 'the stronger, unreasoning, detestable power' has led her, that irrational, hereditary, untamable power and animal passion that leads her to madness calls into question, just as in gothic novels, the stability of the existing order.

Loveling's career did not conclude with the novels that she published around the turn of the century. She published stories in numerous magazines and contributed several articles to *Nederland*, *Het Lees kabinet*, *De Vlaamsche Gids* and *Carolus*, etc. about her voyage to Australia around 1900. Loveling continued to write during the First World War, and from 1914 onwards kept a diary that was published posthumously and enjoyed considerable success. In recent decades a few of her stories and novels have been republished, but it is too soon to speak of a real revival.