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Post-theist Constructions of Meaning in Literature

The Example of Simon Vestdijk

Abstract – Are literary post-theism and atheism marking the end of metaphysical queries or do they confirm the Kantian inevitability of such unanswerable questions? Can this be seen in the characters that are described and the ideas that are presented? These questions are treated in relation to the Dutch author Simon Vestdijk (1898-1971) who was a declared atheist. Four themes with a religious aspect can be discerned in his extensive work: loss, detachment, restlessness and redemption. Special attention is paid to his series of 150 sonnets 'Madonna with the falcons'. Finally, it is concluded that Vestdijk's thought, representative of an influential form of atheism, suggests a spirituality which is aporetic and vexed by dilemmas.

Which post-theist or a-theological meanings of life manifest themselves after the often invoked 'death of God'? From Schleiermacher's both enlightened and romantic speeches to the cultured despisers of religion (1799) to the present, many theological authors underscored the importance of the languages of art and literature. It should be possible, they assumed, to discover traces of the missing 'God' in the morphology and the semantics of these languages. In many respects different from the rationalizing discourse of theologians and philosophers, these languages were considered to be better qualified to develop into 'languages of the Unsayable' (Budick-Iser 1989).

Literary language in particular, was supposed to owe this quality to its specific characteristics: the allusive and alluring power of poetry, the multidimensional openness of narrative structures, the polyphony of dramatic literature. It is evident that these qualities offer opportunities. The question is: Do they escape the dilemmas and the aporias that afflicted religious thought if assessed on rational criteria? The following argument is based on the assumption that possibly these dilemmas and aporias have to be accepted as an inevitable given. It cannot be excluded that they appear to be resolvable on some other or higher level of reflection (as some academic atheists claim), but more likely is – as Kant wrote in the famous first paragraph of his *Critique of Pure Reason* – that those annoying metaphysical questions are forced on us by the nature of reason itself. They are 'questions that reason cannot reject, but neither can be answered by it, because they totally defy its capability'. Aporias and dilemmas can be considered as the logical forms of these questions, which, according to Kant, as we know, lead to antinomies when regarded as cognitive questions. *Aporias* are problems that do not result in any clear conclusion or solution and which, on the contrary, emerge over and over again, no matter how they are formulated and apparently resolved. Emmanuel Levinas used the French word 'revenant,' in its double meaning of 'phantom' and 'that which recurs repeatedly,' to characterize this peculiarity of aporias (Levinas

1975: 213).¹ *Dilemmas* are argumentations that may lead to a conclusion, but one that consists in two or more equally unwelcome statements.

The question was, whether literary language could be able to escape these hindrances. It seems obvious that it prevents, or at least hampers, with the compositional and stylistic tools available to it, the development of manifest contradictions – which Karl Barth, for instance, designated as inescapable theologically (Barth 1975: 7).² Perception of contradictions clearly assumes a logical ordering of assertions. In a narrative or poetic connection this ordering is not first required. Through its logical oddity literary language, perhaps, is able to guide us all the more convincingly into the kingdom of dilemmas and aporias covering important aspects of the human spirit. How can we penetrate that kingdom and the ‘languages of the Unsayable’ that may be found there? Or are the ‘new atheists’ right in their claim that physical cosmology and evolutionary biology are capable of positively liberating us from these obscure languages? (Bradley-Tate 2010: 7)³

The background to this query is formed by a research project on the constructions of meaning to be found in the works of Dutch post-theist authors (Multatuli, S. Vestdijk, W.F. Hermans, A. Grunberg). The question just posed, can be repeated here: Does literary post-theism mark the end of so-called meaningless metaphysical queries and ridiculous notions? Can this be inferred from the plot described and the ideas presented in the works of these authors? Or is it justified to choose for the probability just referred to? Doesn’t the peculiar kingdom of dilemmas and aporias express itself in a more unforced way in narrative or poetic connections? The Dutch poet and psychiatrist Rutger Kopland, who is a declared non-believer, formulated the adage ‘The finder hasn’t looked properly’, thereby expressing an insight which is crucial to his thought and poetry (Kopland 2001). It means that people who find definite answers to the so-called questions of life (‘Who am I?, Where do I go?, What is the meaning of life?’) are victims of self-deception. The adage has not necessarily to be understood as a positivistic rejection of the desire for transcendence. On one hand it is a plea to leave definite answers as well as the claim to be able to find them behind, on the other, it implies the acceptance of the fact that we will keep on asking these eternal questions.⁴

1 Cf. Levinas (1974: 213): ‘Le *scepticisme* est le refutable, mais aussi le revenant.’

2 Cf. Barth (1975: 7): ‘Schon das Mindestpostulat der Widerspruchsfreiheit ist für die Theologie nur in ganz bestimmter, für den Wissenschaftstheoretiker schwerlich tragbarer Interpretation annehmbar: Die Theologie wird zwar keine prinzipielle Unaufhebbarkeit der von ihr geltend zu machenden „Widersprüche“ behaupten. Aber die Sätze, in denen sie ihre Aufhebung behauptet, werden Sätze über das freie Handeln Gottes und also keine die Widersprüche „aus der Welt schaffenden“ Sätze sein.’

3 Bradley and Tate (2010: 7) offer an eloquent refutation of this claim: the reason for the great popularity of new atheism is the presentation of ‘a new and powerful creation mythology that – like all mythologies – performs an implicit anthropological service’. ‘Dawkins is persistently concerned to *aestheticize* the truth claims of evolutionary biology quite independently of their empirical truth-value’ (ibid., p. 9).

4 See Kopland 2001. Cf. Goud 2010a: 117.

1 Post-theism – Atheism – Post-atheism

It is time to come to a clarification of the key concepts 'post-theism' and 'atheism'. I define *post-theism* in the line of H.J. Adriaanse (1995: 237) as the break with the theistic view of God as a non-embodied person, 'an omnipresent spirit, who is perfectly free, the creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation'.⁵ This idea of God has lost its plausibility through various converging developments. This has to do particularly with the stamp that science and, more broadly, rationalism has made on our culture. Because of this, religion appears to be condemned to a form of subjectivism, 'music, an unending inner feeling' (Adriaanse 1995: 91). In my opinion there is little to remark on regarding the correctness of this diagnosis, and newer forms of religiosity actually confirm it. These new forms of religiosity generally abandon theistic representations, with their characteristic tendency to objectivize themselves into God or gods, and prefer to direct their attention to practices involving feeling and meditation. Harvey Cox established the 'sheer elusiveness' of the new religiosity he encountered among his students in the nineties of the previous century.⁶ *Atheism* is in fact part of post-theism; it shares its characteristics, but gives it a polemical focus. It concentrates its efforts on conscious rejection of theistic faith and displays a tendency to extend this rejection to criticism of all forms of religion. The categories post-theism and atheism used here are not uncomplicated. They display the tendency to deviate from their definition and to include other categories. Atheism has a rich tradition, within which there are countless variations. I shall name four variations and a fifth that stands apart in multiple respects. In each case I shall mention, very briefly, narrative or poetic examples from Dutch literature.

First there is the atheism in the line of the enlightened critique of religion. Driven by polemical fervour, it aims consciously at the unmasking of religious hypocrisy, delusion and illusions. Well-known and influential examples of it are the eighteenth century theory regarding priestly deception, the more refined projection theories of the nineteenth century masters of mistrust (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), the logical and language philosophical critique of the nonsensical nature of religious assertions in the twentieth century. In Dutch literature these lines of critique are represented by Multatuli, Feuerbach's friend and intellectual kin, and by Willem Frederik Hermans, who derived his inspiration from the criteriology of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. A present day form of this enlightened atheism is the religious criticism of authors like Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and others, who support their views with cosmological and evolutionary biological theories. Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate (2010: 10–11) designated the desire to create a new mythos and the interest in literature as typical characteristics of these 'new atheists'. In this connection they discussed the reception of the New Atheism in the work of four contemporary novelists: Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Philip Pullman and Salman Rushdie.

A salient feature of Nietzschean atheism, secondly, is its consciousness of the tragic consequences of God's death, of what has been irrevocably lost and of the

⁵ Swinburne 1977:4. Cf. Adriaanse 1995: 237.

⁶ In his foreword to Beaudoin 1998: X. Cf. Goud 2000: 20.

efforts mourning His death requires of us. The latter comes to light in Nietzsche's famous, reflective query: '*How shall we comfort ourselves*, we greatest of all murderers?' In Dutch literature, aspects of this tragic attitude can be found in the influential essays of the literary critic Menno ter Braak but also, inasmuch as he manifested himself as a critic of religion, in the works of his literary friend and kindred spirit Simon Vestdijk.

The third shape of atheism is the one that, after having declared theism to be history, seeks acceptable religious alternatives. The figure of Simon Vestdijk comes into play here again (see parr.2 and 3 below). In his comprehensive essay entitled *The Future of Religion* (1943, published 1947), he contested the metaphysical projection leading to spiritual disintegration, which has become characteristic of Christianity. This metaphysical disintegration introduced a form of transcendence that can be verified nor refuted; it gives rise to an attitude of self-conceit and, according to Vestdijk's firm conviction, is irreconcilable with the love of neighbour (Vestdijk 1975: 68, 213). Its hegemony should be transposed to a religion of a mystical, introspective nature tinted with Buddhism, one which 'does not speculate on strong emotions such as fear and remorse but calls solely upon the insight of reason' (Vestdijk 1975: 272).

Post-atheism is a fourth variant of atheism to be named here. This variant not only relinquishes theist, but also atheistic categories. It abandons affirmation as well as negation of the concepts creation, sin, deliverance and gratitude and dedicates itself to a post-traditional search for religious and moral possibilities in a world without God. As its background it frequently indicates the destruction or reversal of all values through the Holocaust and the new outbreak of relentless religious violence, symbolized by nine-eleven. Many young writers, natives or born of foreign parents, in Europe and the US, can be included in this category (Bradley-Tate 2010:109-110). The figure of the young Dutch author Arnon Grunberg can serve as an example; in his novels he strives to expose the truth with disillusioned radicality. In spite of his own intentions, often made explicit, he sometimes seems to end up with results in the spirit of a program formulated by Imre Kertész as follows: 'Old prophecies speak of the death of God. Since Auschwitz we are more alone, that much is certain. We must create our values ourselves, day by day, with that persistent though invisible ethical work that will give them life, and perhaps turn them into the foundation of a new European culture'.⁷

As a separate, fifth position, I here mention the religiously oriented atheism that is argued by Jewish and Christian theologians and philosophers of religion (to mention a few prominent names: Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jan Assmann). Often this atheism bases its arguments on the iconoclasm which is typical of these traditions and extends it to a criticism of the anthropomorphism, the tendency to projection and the creation of comfortable images of God which are supposed to characterize religious imagination in general. Seen in this way, atheism has a purifying function. By removing certain all-too-human, self-made images of the Godhead, it does its part in clearing the image of the God of faith. In this connection it figures, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, as 'both a break and a link between religion and faith' (Ricoeur 1969: 59).

7 Kertész 2002. Cf. about Grunberg's nearly invisible search for values Goud 2010b: 166-169.

2 Vestdijk: Four Themes

In the context of this article, as announced, I intend to pay particular attention to the third form of atheism, which, after having declared theism to be history, seeks more acceptable religious alternatives. The works of the brilliant Dutch author Simon Vestdijk (1898-1971) offer an exquisite opportunity to show the possibilities of this form of atheism and to test its presumptions. Vestdijk was an atheist but showed respect for the mystical introspection of Buddhism in his voluminous, fiercely debated essay *The Future of Religion* mentioned above, wrote some novels with striking observations and reflections on religious life, and expressed himself with great refinement in his poetry. An attentive reading of his works will help to support a better understanding of post-theism – also in its lyrical, spiritual, moral and even religious aspects.

In many respects Vestdijk was a standard for colleagues and literary critics, in life here and there ‘a standard to be avoided’ (Schouten 1996: 52), since his death an increasingly negated standard. In Dutch literature he won all the prizes available; several times he was proposed as candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. His productivity may almost be considered proverbial. He represented a standard in diverse literary fields: as a novelist and poet *par excellence*, but also as an erudite critic and intellectual. He revealed the last-named qualities in his essays and book reviews in particular. Some of them are as thick as a book. Religious themes as well – better: themes with a religious aspect – are discussed in them with great regularity. I shall name four: loss, detachment, restlessness and yearning for unity.

Loss

A central given in Vestdijk’s work is the unrequited love of his alter ego Anton Wachter for the adored girl Ina Damman, in particular Anton’s awareness, proceeding from it, ‘how unwaveringly faithful he would remain to something he had lost, – something that he had never possessed’ (Vestdijk 1982: 193). Vestdijk himself affirmed many times how significant this experience was for him and even called it his Beatrice or Orpheus experience.⁸ Living and loving means saying farewell and being deprived of someone, irrevocably deprived. Vestdijk identified this insight in the work of Emily Dickinson, who at that time was little known in the Netherlands and whom he introduced in his first great essay.⁹ ‘A loss of something ever felt I’, she wrote in one of her poems. She was aware of the fact that loss, that absence, ‘was her essential state of being, and putting it into words the meaning of her existence’ (Haasse 2007: 65).

Detachment

A line of renouncement and of detachment runs through Vestdijk’s work and life. The loved one he is missing acquires the features of a severe Madonna, a *deinè theos*, a fearsome goddess, ‘who hunts those who seek her to the point of death and demands everything they have to give’ (Haasse 2007: 71). The detach-

⁸ In a letter dated 19-11-1943 to Theun de Vries. See Vestdijk & De Vries 1985: 138.

⁹ Published in the magazine *Forum*, 1933. An English translation appeared in Vestdijk 2002. Hazeu provides a list of the many authors discovered by Vestdijk or introduced by him in the Netherlands (2005: 12-13).

ment required in the service to her can have many aspects. That of pure renunciation, 'anomaly of self-restraint,' characteristic of the Apollonian artist (Van Deel 1987: 32-33). That of the hard service to woman as suggested in his poem about a coloured marble: the female image moulded into it 'hardened and inaccessible': 'Her banner passed mockingly through the glass, / Her laugh resounded at every thrust' (Vestdijk 1987 I: 82). That of a resignation that detaches itself, as in a poem often recited, called 'The Final Moment': 'Dying is the art of suffering living images / With as much detachment / As when they were playing their role in life / Sometimes boring us, and yet fulfilling us' (Vestdijk 1987 II: 48).

Restlessness

Along with these, a line of Dionysian restlessness, confusion and demoniac obsession runs through Vestdijk's work, dominating, for example, his novels *Meneer Visser's bellevaart* (tr. Mr. Visser's ride to hell) (1938), *De nadagen van Pilatus* (tr. The declining years of Pilate) (1938), *De redding van Fré Bolderhey* (tr. The salvation of Fré Bolderhey) (1946). In a fine essay about the music of Mahler, whom he admired very much, he wrote about the 'sacral-demonical' in it, which transcends the institutionalized and more structured religiosity. In Mahler's strange harmonies the elevation and the disasters of human life do not exclude each other. Under the rule of the sacral-demonical, resting in God is abandoned 'with the implacability not of a sentence, but of the divine gaze, whereby the idyll and the decline of existence are no longer antitheses' (Vestdijk 1983: 112).

Redemption

Finally, what is striking in Vestdijk's work, is the yearning for redemption running through everything – through loss and isolation, detachment and restlessness. It gives his thinking and his writing a religious dynamic, but it can take on many and various forms. Martin Hartkamp (1971) attempted to bring the various forms under the common denominator of yearning for unity and inseparability: yearning for nothingness, for death, for the prenatal state, for a Buddhist victory over desire, for the sea, for symbiosis with the mother, for the loved one. The precise nature of the relationship between these various forms, and the sustainability of Hartkamp's systematization under a common denominator, require further study. At first sight it would appear that two tendencies are in tension: Vestdijk's passion for mystic introspection, which he justified extensively in his essay *De toekomst der religie* (tr. The future of religion), and his Nietzschean preference for earthiness and physicality. Ultimately, his poetic cycle 'Madonna met de valken' (tr. Madonna with the falcons), a work consisting of 150 sonnets, is dominated by the just-named perspective.¹⁰ In the last sonnets the unapproachable mother appears in the image of the 'Madonna with the falcons,' in which she is sung about and hated, adored and avoided, but also followed and served come what may: 'The Mother remains before us until the end of days, / All the more where she cast us off most cruelly.'

10 In the sonnet Vestdijk found a poetic form ideal for his wishes: '(it) allows the poet to sacrifice, within the bounds of poetry, to the development of ideas, argument and speculation without giving way to the dangers of prose' (Vestdijk 1991: 154).

3 Vestdijk: Madonna with the Falcons

Vestdijk began writing this voluminous cycle in 1942, during his internment in St Michielsgestel camp, installed by the Nazi's to detain a large group of Dutch intellectuals. He wrote in a letter to Theun de Vries (February 28, 1943): 'of the poetry I wrote in camp (...) approximately half is dedicated to a medieval, semi-legendary topic that I personally consider the best thing I ever wrote; a series of 150 sonnets titled *Madonna met de valken*'.¹¹ He worked on polishing it until publication in 1947. Up to the present this imposing cycle has remained practically 'uncultivated territory' in Vestdijk research (Van Deel 1996: 42). A quick reading already indicates that a thorough analysis would be very much worthwhile. This long cycle, as a long line of 'shining germinating cells' – Vestdijk's famous metaphor for the poem –, in the form of a personally created mythology, includes many of Vestdijk's motifs and themes: the sublimated Ina Damman experience, the service to woman that the troubadour assigns himself, the woman who precedes him into the high mountains,¹² the loneliness and the ordeal to be endured, the struggle for redemption, the dreams about wife and child, and so much more. Metaphysical ideas are presented in passing and laid aside. In his correspondence with his friend Reverend Henkels, Vestdijk confesses concerning his four-week internment in the prison in Scheveningen (January-February 1943) that he has had 'rather rare experiences in the field of religion', which opened his eyes to his 'religious needs'. He no longer wants to ignore this fact nor shove it under the carpet, although his opinion that all objectified religion and theology is 'nonsense' remains unchanged. Two weeks later he writes Henkels: 'My reactions were totally infantile; but I only wanted to demonstrate that I do not feel embarrassed about them' (Hazeu 2005: 404-405). A reflection of this deeply felt ambiguity – on the one hand, religious need, on the other, rejection of it – can, for instance, be found in the hundred-and-nineteenth sonnet of the Madonna-cycle (Vestdijk 1985 II: 289).¹³

11 Vestdijk & de Vries 1985: 81-82.

12 Haasse (1972: 70-101) provides a fascinating overview of the meaning of the high mountains in Vestdijk's work.

13 Also quoted by Hazeu 2005: 404-405. The Dutch text of this poem goes as follows:

CXIX

Waartoe, zoo Hij mij mint, zoo hemelhoog
Zijn troostrijk licht van mij vandaan gehouden?
Ik kan niet klimmen, en Hij wil Zijn gouden
Oogen niet laten zinken in mijn oog.

Met al Zijn liefde ben 'k de minst betrouwde,
Een op de grens gezeten nachtpauwoog,
Die met Zijn stralen zich vergeefs volzoog
In deze traag doorwielde wereldkoude.

De afstand stijgt; ik voel mijn sterven al
De som vermeerd'ren Zijner ongenade,
En uit mijn oogen slinkt het laatste licht.

Het Niets, die and're god van het heelal,
Houdt met de Vader zwevend evenwicht:
Op welke schaal ik sta is licht te raden.

CXIX

Wherefore, if indeed He loves me, high above
 His comforting light withheld from me?
 I cannot climb, and He will not let
 His golden eyes descend into my eye.

With all His love yet am I the least of confidants,
 A small emperor moth sitting on the boundary,
 For nought sucking its fill on His rays
 In the creeping chill of this world.

The distance rises; I feel my dying now
 Increasing the sum of His disfavour
 And from my eyes the last light slips away.

Nothingness, the other god of the universe,
 Keeps hovering balance with the Father:
 Easy to guess the scale I stand upon.

The four motifs named above can all be found in the cycle 'Madonna with the falcons'. In the sonnet quoted, it is in particular *loss* that is expressed, reverse of the yearning for unity and fulfilment. The 'I', the implied poet or, better yet, the troubadour, here explores – in religious-philosophical terms – the theistic solution. His experiences remind one of the Unknowing in his prayer as conceived by Multatuli: 'He's not there, or he must be good (...) It was his task to reveal himself, but he did it not!' (Multatuli 1918: 59) The exploring poet observes nothing of God's love and comforting light. On the contrary, the triple lined verses establish incontrovertibly that he feels a growing distance, a slipping away of the last light, increasing disfavour. He feels he is standing on the scale of Nothingness, 'the other god of the universe'. In the immediately following sonnet doubts are cast on this thought, however ('But if I were nothing, I would not have a voice'). In later sonnets the theistic dream plays up again ('For still, still it will not be curbed / To want to sparkle, flying up upon Thy throne', sonnet 133). In the final analysis, however, the personally created myth of the unapproachable distant mother, the Madonna of the falcons, is the decisive factor, regardless how lonely this myth makes him feel amidst various other words imagined to be holy and great: 'Only *my* word is not at home in the wind (...) I rave about Madonna with the falcons' (sonnet 143).

The central lines contain an impressive self-characterization: 'With all His love yet I am the least of confidants, / A small emperor moth sitting on the boundary, / For nought sucking its fill on His rays / In the creeping chill of this world'. The small emperor moth, of which the female, having large wings, flies sluggishly in the night, has striking eyes on its wings. Grey tints dominate the colouring of the wings. It is as if the gold of God's eyes and of sun rays have not been able to penetrate the white and black of its eyes. It sits on the boundary between light and dark, heat and chill, and turns to the darkness when it is time to choose. The 'chill of the world' in which the small emperor moth feels at home reminds one of the worldview of the American poet E.A. Robinson, a man of melancholy mood. Vestdijk greatly admired this poet stamped by Puritanism, whose vision of human existence was dominated by 'a consciousness of Nothingness; there is no explanation, no comfort' (Haasse 2007: 67).

4 Aporias and Dilemmas

Vestdijk's ideas, which in a number of ways can serve as a model for an important part of current post-traditional religiosity, could be subordinated under the heading 'radical immanence'. A theological parallel is to be found in the thought of Thomas Altizer, which removes the opposition between sacred and profane. 'God' is a dialectical process, ending in the Kingdom of God as a symbol of 'God's' total presence. Eternity consists in the here and now of the affirmation of life; the sacred changes into the profane (Altizer 1980:26). Vestdijk would very likely agree with the critical description given by Altizer, inspired by Nietzsche, of deist or Barthian ideas of God: 'It is God himself who is the transcendent enemy of the fulness and the passion of man's life in the world, and only through God's death can humanity be liberated from that repression which is the real ruler of history' (Altizer 1966: 22). But in his novels and essays life itself – and therefore also the living and thence experimenting consciousness – is at work. More interesting and more to the point than the author's explicit views of life and the possible subordination of his views within a general typology¹⁴ (by qualifying it, for example, as radically immanent), appear to be the open spaces in a story or a poetic cycle, the stumbling blocks in the essayist discourse, the aporias and the dilemmas. I shall list some of the most important ones.

I have defined *aporias* as questions from which no unambiguous conclusion results and which, on the contrary, repeatedly reappear, no matter how they may be reformulated or apparently resolved. They can be said to characterize the worldview taking form in Vestdijk's work. Repetition is one of the general characteristics of poetry, as he observes in *De glanzende kiemcel* (tr. The shining germinating cell). Poetry always displays a preference for the return of things, in the most comprehensive sense of this word (Vestdijk 1991: 216). No doubt this cyclic view of things best met Vestdijk's need for (poetic and narrative) introspection and reflection that recur again and again. It also corresponds with his deeply rooted scepticism – the reason he would be unable to attach himself to any cognitive claim of a philosophic or religious nature whatsoever, not even the atheistic one. His character Dr. Hildevoort, passed away, formerly a biologist, establishes in one of his so-called 'post-mortem manifestos' that he has so far observed no sign of God. 'This does not, however, mean that we deny the existence of God. Why should we? If I do not consider the naïve spirits who, after their passage, still have a struggle with the old Adam, I can put it this way: it is no longer important to us; if God would reveal himself unambiguously, we would certainly hasten to reconsider our sceptical attitude; but our special position, in our view, gives us a right to be more demanding in this respect, than our earthly brothers' (Vestdijk 1964: 18-19). Incidentally, this post-mortem fiction appears to make Vestdijk more sceptical than he had expressed in the essay on the future of religion previously referred to. There, with stern indignation, founded on moral as well as psychological grounds, he wrote about the metaphysical projection whereby people not only turned away from their inner being but also from their social existence.

Aporias come inseparably with this cyclical and sceptical approach, in particu-

14 As proposed by Stoker 2012.

lar when they are, furthermore, connected with the motif of restlessness and demon previously mentioned. Vestdijk established with reference to Mahler's music, that idyll and decline are no longer contradictions in the poetic and musical perspective on existence. This is also true in the case of other fundamental contradictions: between order and chaos, good and evil, life and death. They frequently seem to attain resolution in religions and philosophies. In Vestdijk's essay on *Het eeuwige telaat* (Infinite too-lateness), it becomes evident that the highest man can attain in his infinite too-lateness is not victory over, but friendship with time and death. Finiteness and mortality determine the human condition and are inevitable. We can resist our fear of it by becoming one with our finite individuality.¹⁵

Dilemmas were defined as arguments that do lead to a conclusion, but one that consists in two or more equally unwelcome statements. They are contained not so much in Vestdijk's more explicitly stated view of life, as was the case with aporias, but in the attitude to life that is suggested throughout his narrative and poetic works. In the final paragraph of *Terug tot Ina Damman* (tr. Return to Ina Damman), which he himself considered highly significant, loss, which dominates everything and is irrevocable, makes undesirable *both* the steady faithfulness chosen by Vestdijk's alter ego *and* the alternative: the choice for an undirected and perfidious existence. The dilemma is inevitable, however. The divine Mother – speaking in the terms of the myth Vestdijk established and created in 'Madonna met de valken' (tr. Madonna with the falcons) – who symbolizes the deeply desired ideal of totality and indivisibility, 'remains before us until the end of days, / All the more where she cast us off most cruelly'. It is characteristic of the disintegrated state of mind of metaphysicians to choose resolutely, apparently to resolve dilemmas and to play off the so-called higher against the lower. 'Something is constantly white or black, good or bad, holy or unholy, chosen or damned, true or false, pure or impure – there is constantly an "entweder-oder"' (Vestdijk 1975: 191). The integrated person, that is to say: the one who consciously seeks integration, knows, as it were, how to live with dilemmas. 'This loss of consequence naturally also colours his religious worldview, which will be constantly more fluid, dynamic, relativistic than that of the disintegrated type' (Vestdijk 1975: 193).

But underneath the qualifications used here: fluid, dynamic, relativistic, there is a reality that looks considerably less integrated. A reality of dilemmatic contradictions caused by the characteristics of modernity, on one hand, a yearning for 'redemption' (in the many meanings of the word indicated in par. 2) on the other hand; between the indifference of the universe on one side, the choices and projects of human individuals on the other;¹⁶ between an interiority that shuts itself off from the alterity of transcendence on one hand, and, on the other, the underscoring of humanity's earthiness and physicality, that inevitably brings with it the exposure to and the vulnerability for otherness and for the others.¹⁷ In *De toekomst der religie* (tr. The future of religion), Vestdijk wrote the following sum-

15 Whereby I place a different accent than Roder 2001: 25. See http://dare.ubn.kun.nl/bitstream/2066/18967/1/18967_hoofvovs_v.pdf (consulted on 14-01--12).

16 A contradiction Vestdijk tried for many years to soften by enthusiastically practicing astrology, see Hazeu 2005: 126, 142-143, 273-274, 482, 521.

17 See the analysis of several characteristics of modernity, concentrating on the theme of transcendence, by Charles Taylor, in: Schwartz 2004: 6, 10.

mary sentences, which can almost be read as his credo. Actually, in them, the great dilemma's just touched on appear again in unmitigated form.

[Everything centres on] man, who, as a separate individual, moves in the direction of universality, until in death he is given back to the universe and dissolves. That is all. For the rest, man's restless and tormented consciousness assures that he does not experience the evolution from "one" to "everything" as an unforced stream, a natural and spontaneous growth, but as a desperate struggle, where everything is at stake, where one can win it all and lose it all. (...) For us, this game is reality, although, in moments of deeper reflection, we know that we ourselves are this reality, and that there is nothing outside of it, - nothing other than something unnameable, that surrounds us, wherever we expand to, but which we will never experience and which does not, strictly speaking, concern us (Vestdijk 1975: 57-58).

5 Conclusion

Vestdijks thought, representative – as I indicated in section 2 – of an influential shape of atheism, suggests a spirituality which is aporetic and vexed by dilemmas. The aporias and the dilemmas seem to be inescapable, forced on us by the nature of reason itself (Kant). Nothing else is to be done than to find ways of dealing with them – as has been attempted, for example, by Paul Ricoeur in the concluding part of his essay 'Le mal', where the aporia of classical theodicy is interpreted as a positive challenge for philosophers and theologians. On the intellectual level it is a provocation to accept and to integrate the break-down of systematic thought. At the same time, this should be an incentive to make the aporia productive on the practical and emotional levels. The confrontation with dilemmas, however, creates a more complicated situation from the intellectual point of view. Dilemmas cannot be accepted nor integrated, but seem to require a stance of faith or trust – to god or gods, nothingness or the divine mother. Where this should be missing, dilemmas lose their inevitability, their vexing force, their meaning and significance.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I like to thank Mrs. Lydia Penner for her assistance in translating the original Dutch text of this article into English, esp. for her translations of the quotations from literary work.

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