



## Ignorant Dutch Boys Reading German Philosophy?

### The Concept of Ignorance in Rhijnvis Feith's *Brieven aan Sophie* (1806) and Johannes Kinker's *Brieven van Sophie aan Mr. Rhynvis Feith* (1807)

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**Abstract:** The reception of Enlightenment philosophy in the Netherlands has been interpreted in different ways. The idea that the Dutch completely ignored enlightened philosophy was replaced by the idea that there was a special Dutch modification of Enlightenment thought. Through analyzing concepts of ignorance in Feith's and Kinker's discussions about Kantianism, I show that enlightened thinking is an international, multilayered process rather than a development that can be grasped in national frames. That way in Feith's and Kinker's letters a clash between academic and popular philosophy becomes visible that cannot be labelled 'Dutch', but is a broader trend that indicates conflicting concepts of what can or should (not) be known. One strategy displayed in Feith's letters is that of consciously ignoring Kant's insights in order to preserve a notion of direct access to the world that is more apt to everyday experience and cultural knowledge. He tries to claim this intuitive truth by evoking a literary sphere that can deliver insights without engaging into logical argument.

**Keywords:** ignorance / onwetendheid – Enlightenment / Verlichting – Rhijnvis Feith – Johannes Kinker – knowledge / kennis

To explain how German Enlightenment philosophy, and especially that of Immanuel Kant, was received in the Netherlands, Dutch scholars often referred to an etching made by J. E. Marcus between 1800 and 1810:<sup>1</sup>



Etching by J. Marcus, inspired by J. Smies' aquarelle, ca. 1803, Amsterdam City Archives.

The situation depicted here seems obvious. The audience in the picture is not at all enthused by what the speaker at the lectern is saying. From his drawings, we can discern why the men he is speaking to have fallen asleep: The speaker seems to be holding forth on complex epistemological questions. However, André Hanou, specialist in the field of Dutch literature during the Enlightenment, advises us to forgo the apathy shown by the audience and take a closer look at the drawing to consider its philosophical implications:<sup>2</sup> On the right, it shows a popular allegory of the time, an undressed woman representing the 'naked truth'. Whereas the woman in the drawing is reduced to her body as a passive object to illustrate the abstract concept of truth, there are two active observers looking at her on the left side of the drawing: a researcher and a boy. These two observers give the drawing a double dimension. On the one hand, we can look at the

<sup>1</sup> Viktoria Franke, 'De groene bril en de poeffertjespan: het Kant-debat in Nederlandstalige tijdschriften van de verlichting', in *Tijdschrift voor tijdschriftstudies* 23 (2008), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> André Hanou, *Nederlandse literatuur van de Verlichting* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2004), pp. 245-8.

woman through the researcher's eyes who knows Kant's philosophy. In his view the woman represents objective truth. But even if the naked truth is right before his eyes, defining conditions for true statements is not so easy. 'Can I perceive this object objectively? Is what I see the real world? Can I trust my senses to tell me the 'naked' truth about the world or do I see everything through the veil of my perception?' might be theoretical questions the researcher is troubled with. According to Kant, there can be no 'naked' truth as we can not perceive a world independent of our mind. But through the eyes of the boy we get a very different picture. For him the philosophical dimension of the situation is completely withdrawn. What he sees is a woman without clothes whose nudity excites him. We might take the boy to represent the 'other' side of the Enlightenment, the non-didactical, pornographical side interested in nakedness, sex and perversion in a very concrete and explicit way. From the researcher's point of view the boy is ignorant because he does not understand the philosophical dimension of what he is seeing. From the boy's perspective the researcher is ignorant of the fact that there is a naked woman standing right in front of him. The researcher and the boy represent two different kinds of ignorance that are connected to the ability to understand the literal or the figurative meaning of a sign.

Marcus' etching shows that the relation between knowledge and ignorance is vital not only to Enlightenment philosophy, but also to the reception of this philosophy in non-philosophical circles. My paper draws on the relation between knowledge and ignorance that Enlightenment philosophy tried to define. It investigates if and how this relation is relevant to a literary exchange of letters that discusses Kant's philosophy, Rhijnvis Feith's *Brieven aan Sophie* (1806)<sup>3</sup> and Johannes Kinker's *Brieven van Sophie aan Mr. Rhynvis Feith* (1807).<sup>4</sup> The literary texts I am dealing with respond to a new philosophical approach of that time: Instead of trying to discover knowledge and truth, the conditions that determine whether and how we can know and recognize the truth were investigated. This also means determining the limits of knowledge and dealing with the forms and functions of ignorance. Ignorance is never just a simple lack of knowledge. As Dutch literary texts of this period illustrate, ignorance, just like knowledge is not just there, but is produced, negotiated and represented in different ways. As in literary texts, human acting and thinking can be represented in a way that exceeds the possibilities of non-literary texts, literature helps to analyse the process in which knowledge and ignorance are produced.<sup>5</sup> Feith's and Kinker's letters show in very different ways that the possibilities of unlimited knowledge do not extinguish ignorance but trigger a new awareness of what cannot be known. That way they help to get a more nuanced picture of the reception of Enlightenment philosophy in the Netherlands.

The sleeping audience in Marcus' etching does not take any notice of the drawing on the board and its comical or epistemological implications. Hanou goes quite far in interpreting what this means for the reception of the (German/Kantian) Enlightenment in the Netherlands. Using the 'enlightened' metaphors of light and shadow, the last lines of Hanou's introduction to Dutch literature during the Age of Reason, *Nederlandse literatuur van de Verlichting (1670-1830)*, show a gloomy view on the reception of the Kantian Enlightenment in the Netherlands. Looking back at literary and philosophical writing in the second half of the eighteenth century, Germans

<sup>3</sup> Rhijnvis Feith, *Brieven aan Sophie* (Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1806). Cited as 'FBaS'.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Kinker, *Brieven van Sophie aan Mr. Rhynvis Feith* (Amsterdam: J.S. Van Esveldt-Holtrop, 1807). Cited as 'KBvS'.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gamper, 'Einleitung', in *Nicht-Wissen und Literatur: historische Konstellationen 1730 – 1930*, ed. by Michael Bies and Michael Gamper (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2012), pp. 14-5.

tend to identify a heyday of German cultural history, with philosophers like Kant as outstanding intellectuals of international reputation. In the Netherlands, the same period has long been perceived as a time of decay and boredom also sketched in the term ‘pruikentijd’ (‘age of wigs’). In this view the Dutch seem to have ignored the discussions about enlightened concepts and ideas that excited minds all over the rest of Europe.<sup>6</sup> Hanou himself makes clear that this view is not adequate and points at the reception of for example Kantianism in Dutch journals and debates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Because unlike in Germany Kantianism in the Netherlands was not established in institutions like universities or supported by the upper-classes, the idea was developed that the Netherlands had their own, very moderate Enlightenment that cannot be compared to other countries like France and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years the idea of ‘the’ Enlightenment as ‘an entity, a ‘thing’ that was invented and then disseminated’<sup>9</sup> from central regions to peripheral areas has been challenged from a postcolonial and global perspective. The Enlightenment is seen rather as dynamic multiplicity of views than as ‘coherent body of thought.’<sup>10</sup> Scholars describing the ‘religious Enlightenment’ point out that the equation of the Enlightenment with secularization is a modern myth.<sup>11</sup> This ambivalent view regarding the Enlightenment can help us to recontextualize the Dutch reception of Kant’s philosophy not only in terms of whether or not and to what extent this philosophy was accepted by the Dutch. Between acceptance and refusal of enlightened philosophy there are many different nuances that also depend on different theological views. Viktoria Franke’s study gives a differentiated picture of the reception of German philosophy and theology in Dutch review journals of the long eighteenth century, pointing out that the way enlightened philosophy is received in the Netherlands is not specifically Dutch but shows strong parallels with debates in Germany.<sup>12</sup>

So apart from enlightened thinking being an international rather than a national process, it is important to stress its pluralism. Franke emphasizes the fact that Kantianism was broadly discussed in the Netherlands, though this does not mean that it was broadly accepted.<sup>13</sup> She outlines the different theological views on Kantianism that filtered the impact of Kantian thought.<sup>14</sup> Theological reactions to Kant’s philosophy also hint at an important dimension of the reception of Kant in Germany as well as in the Netherlands: In journals trying to reach a bigger

<sup>6</sup> Hanou, *Nederlandse literatuur van de Verlichting*, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> See for example: André Hanou, ‘Enkele kanttekeningen bij de studie van de Verlichting’, in *Literatuur* 7/3 (1990), pp.155-161. André Hanou, ‘Sporen van een Kant-debat in 1807’, in *De negentiende eeuw* (special issue on religion, ed. by Remieg Aerts et al.) 32/3 (2008), pp. 161-178.

<sup>8</sup> Viktoria E. Franke, *Gedeelde wereld: Duitse theologie en filosofie in het verlichte debat in Nederlandse recensietijdschriften, 1774-1837* (Amsterdam & Utrecht: APA-Hollands University Press, 2009), pp. 2-8.

<sup>9</sup> Sebastian Conrad, ‘Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique’, in *The American Historical Review* 117/4 (2012), p. 1001.

<sup>10</sup> Conrad, ‘Enlightenment in Global History’, p. 1002.

<sup>11</sup> David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Franke, *Gedeelde wereld*, p. 292.

<sup>13</sup> Franke, ‘De groene bril en de poffertjespan poffertjespan’, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Franke, *Gedeelte wereld*, pp. 99-168.

audience the compatibility of Kant's philosophy with less intellectual circles and their social practices was vital. There were intellectuals who represented Kantianism in the Netherlands and even had their own journal.<sup>15</sup> But they also reflected the question how Kant could be made accessible to a less intellectual audience.<sup>16</sup> Opponents of Kant were less optimistic about the idea that Kant could be understood by everyone and his philosophy thus be integrated into everyday life and its social practices. Taking a closer look at the specific way in which Kant's philosophy is discussed in Feith's and Kinker's letters can shed light on ideas about the interaction of philosophical thought and social practice of that time. Discussions about Kant in different intellectual milieus in Germany are also included in Feith's letters. They show that Feith's reaction to Kant's philosophy cannot be labelled as 'Dutch', but is a reaction that emerged all over Europe and in Germany itself.

Rhijnvis Feith's *Brieven aan Sophie* (1806) and Johannes Kinker's *Brieven van Sophie aan Mr. Rhijnvis Feith* (1807) were published roughly in the same time as Marcus' etching. One of the letter writers, Johannes Kinker, was a well-known advocate of Kant's in the Netherlands.<sup>17</sup> He was so famous for being a 'Kantian' that the subscription to the 'ignorant' boy on the board in Marcus' etching, 'The person of Jan behind his own I', might allude to him (ridiculing Jan/Johannes, of course).<sup>18</sup> Kinker reacts to five letters written by Rhijnvis Feith, an established literary writer in the Netherlands at the beginning of the nineteenth century and not all associated with Enlightenment thought. Compared to Marcus' etching, these letters give a very different picture of the impact of Enlightenment thinking in the Netherlands. In Feith's correspondence, the Dutch do not seem to be a sleeping audience with respect to Kant's thoughts – something he does not at all consider a good thing. He is especially concerned about his 'young readers', who encounter Kantian philosophy at Dutch universities 'every day' (FBaS IV). He makes it clear from the beginning that his main aim in writing his letters is to point out that Kant's philosophy can in no way be combined with Christianity. What is at stake for him is the Christian faith, especially that of his young readers, who he wants to warn not to think that to study Kant is possible without harming their Christian belief. So according to Feith, instead of being asleep, the younger intellectual generation is very interested in Kant and Feith is highly alarmed about that. Combined with Kinker's fervent defence of Kantianism in his letters to Feith, this heated discussion about enlightened thinking indicates that apathy was not the only reaction to these new ideas in the Netherlands.

The content of Feith's five letters can be briefly summarized. The first letter refuses Kant's idea of a religion governed by reason. The second letter criticizes Kant's epistemology as counter-intuitive and therefore unsuitable as a guideline for personal life. In the third letter, Feith explains why, in his view, Kant's philosophy is not compatible with Christian beliefs. The fourth

<sup>15</sup> For a thorough study of this journal, see Jean Antonio Florance Verweij, *Kant-tekening van een Horrearius: de rol van het 'Magazyn voor de critische wijsgeerte en de geschiedenis van Dezelve' in de Kantreceptie in Nederland* (Nijmegen: Wolf, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> See Annemieke Kouwenberg, 'Kant in den Niederlanden: 'Lektuur bij het ontbijt en aan de thetafel' (1804-1808): Praktischer Kantianismus für Anfänger', in *Nur Narr? Nur Dichter?: Über die Beziehungen von Literatur und Philosophie*, ed. by Roland Duhamel, Guillaume van Gemert (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), pp. 143-164.

<sup>17</sup> André Hanou, *Sluiers van Isis: Johannes Kinker als voorvechter van de Verlichting, in de Vrijmetselarij en andere Nederlandse genootschappen, 1790-1845*, two volumes (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Hanou, *Nederlandse literatuur van de Verlichting*, p. 248.

letter highlights the disputes and disagreements of Kant's adherents, demonstrating that Kant's philosophy is not coherent. In contrast to that, in his fifth letter Feith praises Christian beliefs and their positive effects on personal life. Kinker's (much shorter) letters mirror this structure. He writes five letters defending a religion of reason, Kant's epistemology, the compatibility of Kant's philosophy and Christianity, the value of Kantianism in spite of its incoherence and a Christianity based on Kant's thought.

Apart from the topics discussed, the letters show some striking features in the way they present these topics. First of all, according to the fashion of that time, there is another allegorical woman representing an abstract quality. The addressee of Feith's letters is 'Sophie', who symbolizes wisdom.<sup>19</sup> Also, the ignorant boy in Marcus' etching is echoed by the young readers who are unaware of the dangers of Kant's philosophy and need to be guided in their encounter with Kant. And just like the 'blind' researcher on the board in Marcus' etching, Kant plays a prominent role in Feith's letters. He is portrayed as a rational thinker who is blind to the needs of real people. Feith does not address his young readers, the ignorant boys, directly, but instead writes to the character of Sophie. They become witnesses of his dialogue with Sophie. This rhetorical device of apostrophe is designed to prevent the situation sketched by Marcus: a speaker talking in monologues and boring his audience. Sophie as an allegorical woman without qualities remains very vague, though she is attributed with gender stereotypes, such as a 'soft female heart' (FBaS 4). But vague or not, she is a character who makes it possible for Feith to put his thoughts on a stage by including them in a fictional conversation. Structuring his text with this figure of speech puts his reflections on Kantian philosophy into a fictional setting, a world with its own rules, which are created by him. At the same time, the text remains only semi-fictional, since Feith is an author-narrator. That way, the letters still have a direct link to reality, which stresses their relevance for the 'ignorant boys'.

This has important consequences for the critique rendered on Kantianism in Feith's letters. His speaking to Sophie is meant to have a greater appeal to his readers than it would have had were it not framed as a fictional dialogue. He leaves no doubt that he takes effort to design his text in a way that makes it easier to appeal to a general audience. This motivation is also the reason for another striking feature of his text, which is a point of discussion between him and Kinker: The letters to Sophie are written in verse. For Feith writing in verse means writing 'in een gemeenzamen toon' (FBaS III), in a manner that makes the text generally accessible. This turning the text into a fictional setting (conversation with Sophie) with literary devices (verse) helps Feith to claim that his letters should be considered rather as literature (FBaS III) than as a refutation of Kant (FBaS III). I will try to point out that apart from being a rhetorical trick this way of writing and especially its literary characteristics is essential to Feith's argument.

The peritextual framing of Feith's letters to Sophie gives further insight into the dynamics of the text. The letters do not speak for themselves but are preceded by a foreword and followed by an afterword. Furthermore, every single letter is annotated. Written in prose, these peritextual elements are non-literary, non-fictional counterparts of the letters to Sophie. In his foreword and afterword, Feith points out the relevance of his view directly to the reader. The annotations elaborate on philosophical questions. This shows that Feith tries to convince his readers on different levels. In terms of Aristotle's modes of persuasion, the annotations render logical

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<sup>19</sup> André Hanou, '1807: Jan Kinker publiceert zijn 'Brieven van Sophië aan Mr. Rhyvis Feith' – Sophie's keuze: Kant', in *Nederlandse Literatuur: een geschiedenis*, ed. by Ton Anbeek et al. (Groningen: Nijhoff, 1993), pp. 408-412.

arguments written in prose ('logos': appeal to the audience's sense of logic), whereas the letters written in verse are more about 'pathos' (appeal to the audience's sense of emotions). In all different text types Feith presents himself as a faithful Christian, which falls into the rhetorical category of 'ethos' (appeal to the audience's sense of honesty and/or authority by presenting the speaker (or other characters) as honourable persons). Adjusting this rhetorical device of 'ethos', Feith also tries to show why Kant cannot be trustworthy, because he is not an honourable man, which for Feith equals not (really) being a Christian.

Kinker's reaction to Feith's letters is revealing. By imitating the structures and strategies of Feith's text he tries to expose their weaknesses. First of all, he turns Sophie into an active participant in the conversation, letting her answer Feith's letters and defend Kant's philosophy. Through this, it becomes all the more clear that Feith's letters are a one-sided conversation with Sophie as a passive counterpart. She is more like a platform for Feith's thoughts than a convincing character. Though in adopting the character of Sophie, Kinker seems to take part in Feith's game, he at the same time ironically shows that this game is a masquerade, only insufficiently disguising Feith's attempt to manipulate his audience. He accuses Feith of consciously deceiving his readers by splitting his text into letters in verse and annotations in prose: Feith tries to hide information in the annotations that, as Kinker interestingly assumes, 'most of his readers ... won't read' (KBvS 26). That way, Feith can give an imbalanced account of Kant's thoughts in the letters, which he does correct in his annotations, but does so knowing that they won't be noticed by the general audience. This suggests that Feith wants his readers to remain ignorant of certain aspects of Kant and his philosophy. For example, as Kinker points out, whereas in the letters it is suggested that Kant might be an atheist, the annotations reveal that Feith knows that this is not true. By separating verse from prose Feith seems to try to create a space of poetic freedom in which he is not bound to logical arguments. What particularly enrages Kinker is that Feith emphasizes several times that it is not his aim to refute Kant (FBaS 199), which for Kinker proves that writing about Kant's philosophy in the form of letters to Sophie is a way of disguising Feith's argument against Kant. Kinker is in line here with enlightened ideas about the forms and functions of rhetoric speech: Simple and comprehensible ways of speaking were clearly favoured over trying to appeal to the reader's feelings.<sup>20</sup>

In his response, Kinker wants to show how and why Feith fails his argument in disguise. Through logical arguments Kinker tries to expose Feith's ignorance. Feith's writing in verse is one of the reasons for his failure, because the verse form prevents him from developing his thoughts freely. For Kinker verse is not an adequate form to express philosophical thoughts. It is 'metromania' to seriously try to deal with philosophical arguments and at the same time write in proper metre and rhyme (KBvS 9), as this will distract you and your readers from the philosophical thoughts. Feith's writing according to Kinker fails both as a poetical work and as a philosophical argument. His capital error is to try and combine the two. For Kinker, philosophy and literature are equally relevant, but function in completely different ways. Whereas philosophy tries to think things through in a systematic way, literature in a playful and imaginative way reveals higher truths that transcend reality as it is known. So literature in Kinker's view can never be a simple vehicle to convey philosophical insights, but has to be an original and unique way to gain new insights that cannot be found in any other way. It is unbearable for Kinker to instrumentalize literature for the sake of reaching a broader audience

<sup>20</sup> Gert Ueding, *Moderne Rhetorik: Von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2000), pp. 17-20.

which equals abusing literature in Kinker's view.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Kinker tries to show that Feith's letters and annotations are a sloppy composition of the work of other writers. Instead of really engaging with Kant's thoughts, Feith summarizes other peoples' accounts of Kant. For Kinker, it is evident why Feith's letters are a product of ignorance and cannot point to the truth: They refrain from logical argumentation and form a chaotic and redundant paraphrase of other people's thoughts (KBvS XVII).

Kinker again reveals an important characteristic of Feith's text. He correctly points out that in Feith's letters the direct discussion of Kant's thoughts is only one part of the argument. Apart from citing and discussing Kant, the letters refer to a wider range of (mostly conservative) theologians, intellectuals, critics, writers and poets. What they have in common is their discomfort with all forms of radical rationalism. In one way or the other they try to merge rationalism with revelation, pietism, sensualism and other concepts that deny rational access. Another striking feature of the intellectuals that Feith refers to (apart from Kant) is that most of them, like for example the German jurist-statesman-historian-writer Justus Möser or the English/American theologian-philosopher-chemist Joseph Priestley, publish on a wide range of subjects with philosophy being only one part of their thinking and writing. That way, Feith's letters give insight into the critical bourgeois public sphere that reacted to and widely discussed Kant's thoughts in an attempt to relate them to contemporary society and its social practices. Feith cites members of the Berlin Enlightenment like Friedrich Nicolai, who in his opposition to Kant and Fichte represents popular philosophy of that time and was very active in spreading his ideas in all kinds of (literary) formats and media, gathering other like-minded intellectuals in his famous 'Monday Club' (FBaS 21-2, 31). Feith sympathizes with the Scottish Common Sense School of Philosophy and refers to James Beattie (*An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* 1771) and James Oswald (*An Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion*, 1772). The pietists he cites show the German-Dutch interaction in dealing with enlightened programmatic ideas: the Dutch Frans Hemsterhuis and the German Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi were connected through the network of the 'Münster circle' initiated by princess Amalie von Gallitzin and exchanged their ideas about the compatibility of sensualism and rationalism. Feith heavily relies on the school of supranaturalism that tried to reconcile the supernatural (like belief based on revelation) with the rational. Supranaturalism is one school of protestant Enlightenment theology called 'neology' and was popular in the Netherlands.<sup>22</sup> Feith mentions German representatives of this school like Christoph Ammon and Gottlob Christian Storr, but his main source is Franz Volkmar Reinhard, a protestant theologian who wrote a *System of Christian Morals* (*System der christlichen Moral*, 1802-1816). As unsystematic and eclectic as they are, Feith's references show that while Kant's philosophy was a dominant paradigm at the time, enlightened thinking was a much more ambivalent, diverse and international field that can hardly be grasped by trying to analyse which circles and countries did or did not accept Kantianism. Feith joined into ongoing discussions which show that not only in Germany itself 'the' Enlightenment was a heterogeneous movement with a variety of schools that differed enormously in the way they dealt with (Kantian) rationalism. The way in which this rationalism

<sup>21</sup> For a differentiated analysis of Kinker's poetical and philosophical views, see G. J. Johannes, *Geduchte verbeeldingskracht! Een onderzoek naar het literaire denken over de verbeelding - van Van Alphen tot Verwey* (Amsterdam 1992), chapter 'JA, 'T IS DE VINDING...' (KINKER), pp. 191-234.

<sup>22</sup> Franke, *Gedeelde wereld*, pp. 121-3.



should or could be merged with social practices was discussed all over Europe. Feith's letters are a patchwork of international popular philosophy.

Though Kinker tries to attack Feith's views with logical arguments, he at the same strongly relies on 'ethos' by ridiculing Feith and showing that he is not an honourable man who can therefore not be trusted. He is not only irritated by Feith's imperfect philosophical reasoning, but he also feels that Feith insults Kant personally, though again Feith claims that he does not want to insult anyone in his letters (FBaS III). Nevertheless, on the frontispiece of his letter, there is another ignorant boy, searching in the dark with a little lantern in his hand. For Kinker it is all too obvious that this little boy is meant to be Kant, presented as little servant following his master's order to look for worms in the dark (KBvS XIX). Kinker takes offence on behalf of Kant. He thinks that Feith is a dwarf who tries to fight a giant (KBvS VI). For Kinker, speaking through Sophie actually is a way to feel free to take his turn in insulting Feith, because, as he emphasizes, using another female stereotype, a 'Kantian woman' may become quick-tempered when she is attacked (KBvS XIX). Sophie does not treat Feith gently in her letters. According to her, Kant can only laugh at him (KBvS 4). It is not Kant, but Feith who is an ignorant boy walking in the dark, carrying a lantern that he himself covered (KBvS 6). With both Kant and Feith walking in the dark, the metaphors of light and shadow so popular during the Age of Reason become confused. Seemingly, both rational knowledge and religion can make you blind to the 'real' world. The image of Feith as an ignorant boy is programmatic. Kinker calls him naive and compares his clinging to spiritual welfare as a personal motivation for virtuous behaviour to giving in to sexual drives (KBvS 27-8). That way Feith becomes the ignorant boy in Marcus' etching, unable or unwilling to understand abstraction, seeing a naked woman instead of truth.

The contrast between Kinker's and Feith's poetics becomes all too obvious here. Feith represents sentimentalism, a literary movement that had radicalized into the poetics of common sense at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The basic assumption was that people can gain new insights through their own experience. The poet can experience nature more intensely and tries to communicate his experience to his readers by writing literature. Authentic feelings are most important which is why literary texts should be as readable and accessible as possible in order not to obstruct the reader's feelings.<sup>23</sup> In the common-sense poetics, the anti-intellectualist tendencies of sentimentalism become even more prominent. Simplicity is praised and exalted poetry is criticized.<sup>24</sup> Kinker's poetry might be seen as an example of poetry that was refused by common sense writers: It needs a lot of annotations by his author to make it accessible to the reader.<sup>25</sup> In Kinker's view the poet does not depend on experience and nature. He is autonomous and can rely completely on his imagination. The quality of poetry is not at all connected to its accessibility, but to the extent in which it reveals deep truth and new insights. One might even say that it is an indicator of its quality if most readers do not understand a poem. The ignorance of the majority of reader's singles out the poet and the happy few who can understand him. It is precisely this attitude towards ignorance that is at the chore of Feith's critique of Kantianism.

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<sup>23</sup> See Annemieke Meijer, *The Pure Language of the Heart: Sentimentalism in the Netherlands 1775-1800* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 9-39.

<sup>24</sup> See Johannes Oosterholt, *De ware dichter: De vaderlandse poëtische discussie in de periode 1775-1825* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1998), esp. the chapter 'Het verzet tegen metafysische haarkloverij: een common sense-poëtica', pp. 38-83.

<sup>25</sup> Oosterholt, pp. 95-96.

The kind of ignorance Kinker accuses Feith of is an absence of knowledge. Feith is not well-informed about Kantianism and therefore his ideas about the Christian religion are simply wrong. This also implies that Feith's ignorance can be overcome by reading Kant and adjusting his concept of religion according to rational principles. Feith's letters, however, imply different concepts of ignorance. For Feith it is important to stress that Kinker's concept of ignorance is not just a matter of presence or lack of information, but a hierarchical concept involving knowledge that is only accessible to a group of expert insiders. Ignorance then is the knowledge rejected by a dominant cultural group of intellectuals.<sup>26</sup> Not everyone can understand Kant, Feith points out (FBaS 32), which in itself is an argument for him that Kant's philosophy cannot be a trustworthy guideline for everyone's personal life. The only way to accept Kantianism without understanding it would be by trusting an expert group of philosophers. This operation might be one of the basic operations in modern society: trusting something to be true not by one's own insight and experience, but by knowing that there are experts who confirm the truth through their research scientifically.<sup>27</sup> Feith claims that this operation does not work with regard to religious convictions, because these insights need to be accessible to everyone personally.

Delegating insights on religious matters to some expert-philosophers will, according to Feith, lead to estrangement. Feith warns Sophie that Kant's rational principles will detach her from her direct environment, from her friends, but also from little things like worms and blades of grass on a spring day (FBaS III). Very much in line with the poetics of sentimentalism Feith tries to point out that Kant's thought estranges people from their perceptions, experiences, intuitions and needs. What Kinker calls 'betogen' (KBvS IV) ('argue'), is 'speculeren' (FBaS III,30; 'speculate') for Feith – a game that common people with common sense do not have access to, as it exceeds their intellectual capacity. What Feith hints at here is what William James as one of the founders of pragmatism would in a famous metaphor call the 'cash value' of philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century: Philosophical truth depends on its value for individual social practices.<sup>28</sup> Feith essentially argues that Kant does not need to be understood. He can and must be ignored because his abstract reflections will make people distrust their perceptions, needs and feelings. Only once you have understood that Kant's philosophy as a whole is not suited to replace religion, reading Kant becomes productive because certain aspects of his work are inspiring (FBaS III, VI, 200).

Here Feith's own concept of ignorance comes into play. For Feith ignorance does not mean absence of knowledge, but rejection of knowledge and of the way it is generated. Ignorance here becomes a choice and is not a deficit. To know something means to ignore something else. To accept religious truths generated by revelation and tradition, one has to ignore rational knowledge. And to accept rational knowledge, one has to ignore religious insights that are not generated rationally. These two forms of knowledge are not compatible as they are based on ignoring each other. This relation of knowledge and ignorance is the one depicted in the researcher's and the boy's view in Marcus' etching. The etching also touches on the main question

<sup>26</sup> Gamper, 'Einleitung', pp. 3-5.

<sup>27</sup> About the difference between expert knowledge and popular philosophy, see Hans Adler and Rainer Godel, 'Einleitung: Formen des Nichtwissens im Zeitalter des Fragens', in *Formen des Nichtwissens der Aufklärung* (München: Fink, 2010), pp. 14-5.

<sup>28</sup> George Cotkin. 'William James and the Cash-Value Metaphor', *Etc.: A Review of General Semantics* Vol. 42 (1985) pp. 37-46, available at: <http://works.bepress.com/gcotkin/14/>.

discussed in Feith's and Kinker's letters, whether the bible and other religious texts have to be taken literally (KBvS 8). The ignorant boy can only perceive the literal meaning. For him, a naked woman is a naked woman and not some allegory of truth and/or the conditions under which we can make true statements. In the religious sphere this means that main dogmas like the resurrection of Christ have to be literally true and not in a figurative sense. To understand a text literally is not to be forced into abstraction. In an audacious move, Feith connects grasping the literal meaning of a sign to trusting what you see and not being talked into mistrusting your senses. Feith's letters are an example of boldly refusing the Kantian, 18<sup>th</sup>-century's 'loss of the real'. The form of his letters corresponds with his views. In the letters Feith tries to write a text that through its pleasurable form is accessible to everyone. They are not meant to pass on expert knowledge to an elite group of intellectuals. The literary aspects of the text connect the letters to an aesthetic sphere. The form of the letters is not only a rhetorical trick to reach a bigger audience but demonstrates Feith's doubts about Kant's philosophy: The fact that an idea is developed logically does not necessarily mean it is true in the 'individual' way described above. To relate to the readers' personal life, a (semi-)literary form is more suitable. In Feith's view literature is a way to uplift the audience by appealing to its experience and feelings.

Kinker's response to Feith's letters shows the clash between their two concepts of ignorance. Kinker's concept of ignorance is not structural, but gradual. For him, ignorance can be overcome, which is why he wants to bring Feith into a logical argument. If Feith overcomes his naiveté and understands the Kantian thought system, this new knowledge will help him to develop a different concept of religion. This is why Sophie expects Feith to answer her letters, because the dialogue needs to be continued in order to overcome Feith's ignorance. At the same time, she defines the conditions for Feith's answer: He has to write in prose. At first sight this requirement only concerns the form of the letters (prose, not verse), but prose is the medium in which reasonable argument takes place, which is why asking Feith to write in prose means asking Feith to engage in logical reasoning. For Sophie, the literary form of Feith's letters obscures their meaning rather than forming an alternative way of discovering truth:

Dat rijm, die noten, al de Schrijvers, die gij daar  
 Hebt uitgeschreven en gestapeld op elkaar,  
 Waar mee gij 't stalenboek die dikte hebt gegeven –  
 Al die herhalingen, waar mee het is doorweven –  
 Dat bont gewemel, dat van rein en onrein krielt  
 Schijnt een beezetne, door een geestenheir beziel –  
 Een Daemonicus, waar honderde Daemonen,  
 Als halve broeders bij een stiefmoer zamenwonen.  
 Gij vraagt *verdraagzaamheid*; maar hebt gij 't wel verdiend? ...  
 Nu, 'k wacht uw antwoord, doch in prosa slechts, mijn vriend! ....<sup>29</sup>  
 (KBvS 62)

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<sup>29</sup> All those rhymes and notes and writers that you have / described and piled up here, / which is how you made this pattern book that long – / all those repetitions that are interwoven into the text – / this motley confusion that is crawling with pure and impure thoughts / looks like someone who is possessed by an army of ghosts – / a daemonicus where hundreds of demons / live together like half-brothers at their stepmother's. / You are asking for *tolerance*; but did you deserve that? ... / Well, I am waiting for your answer, but only in prose, my friend! [transl. BvD]

Sophie underlines that Feith enters a dark, demonical area by refusing the light of reason (once more turning Feith's metaphor of faith as light upside down). The unoriginality ('die noten [...] gestapeld op elkaar'), redundancy ('herhalingen') and breakdown of structure ('bont gewemel') of his text affect its purity ('onrein'). In Sophie's imagery, these impure thoughts create a darkness in which demons can gather ('waar honderde Daemonen [...] zamenwonen') (KBvS 62). Sophie wants Feith to clarify his thoughts in the light of reason to overcome his ignorance. It is not surprising that Feith does not answer Sophie's letters, which might be the most appropriate form of putting his concept of ignorance into practice.<sup>30</sup>

Feith's and Kinker's letters represent different ways of dealing with the impact of enlightened philosophy at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Kinker represents Kantianism as a philosophical discipline that expects everyone to join into rational discourse. Feith's letters show how popular philosophy reacted to Kantianism. He tries to create a 'literary bubble' that can exist independent of reason as an all-determining first principle. In the world created by Feith, cultural and everyday knowledge determines whether philosophical insights are useful or not. He creates a contrast between real life and philosophical abstraction that Kinker is not able to redeem. The dialogue between the two becomes impossible because along the line of Feith's argument Kinker simply lacks the delicate sensitivity to grasp the authentic feeling that Feith tries to convey in his letters. In Kinker's view it is Feith who obstructs real understanding by refraining from rational discourse. Feith bases his letters on a form of knowledge that is generally shared as opposed to expert knowledge. He advocates a productive ignorance of philosophical abstraction that keeps people capable of dealing with life's complexity. Instead of labelling Feith's willing ignorance 'Dutch' as opposed to Kinker as a representative of 'German' enlightenment, their exchange of letters highlights the clash of academic and popular philosophy that characterized enlightened society in Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries. This confirms the notion of 'the' Enlightenment as a multi-layered, heterogeneous and international process and stresses the importance of the dynamics between expert and popular knowledge for the reception of enlightened philosophy. From Kinker's perspective, Feith's letters are a symptom of the ignorance of a great part of the people to new philosophical ideas. Up until the twentieth century this interpretation of his letters was dominant. From the perspective of cultural history it is important to point out that Kinker's letters can also be seen as symptomatic for the ignorance of Kantian philosophers to the fact that they more often than not weren't able to communicate their all-embracing ideas to a broader audience.

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<sup>30</sup> A letter by Sophie's brother 'Christian', published anonymously in 1807, refrains even more from logical argument than Feith's letters: Christianus, *Brief van Sophia aan Mr. J Kinker, de brieven, door denzelven, op haren naam, aan Mr. Rhijnvis Feith geschreven, betreffende*, (Utrecht: Van Terveen, 1807).

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