

A Poor, Inspired and Melancholy Poet

Willem Bilderdijk, a Calvinist Celebrity

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[RICK HONINGS]

On December 18, 1831, the Dutch poet Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831) drew his last breath. This brought to an end the life of one of the most colourful, influential and versatile figures of the early nineteenth century in the Netherlands. Bilderdijk didn't just write poetry, he was also a jurist, linguist and all-round man of letters, a historian, philosopher, theologian, botanist, mathematician, architect and portrait artist. Nowadays he is mainly seen as a romantic and forever complaining poet, who expressed his *Weltschmerz* in overblown poetry, with high-minded lines like 'For me, for me, is nought to crave / In this punishing life, except the grave.' Bilderdijk wrote constantly and about everything under the sun: life and death, love and hate, religion, politics, a child's death, the King's birthday, the cooking of eggs. He was even inspired by the flies in autumn. His distaste for tobacco and German stoves was also expressed in verse.

His contemporaries regarded Bilderdijk as the greatest living poet, on a par with Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. There wasn't a genre he didn't practise; in total he wrote more than three hundred thousand lines of verse. His collected poems fill fifteen hefty tomes, full of mythological, political and religious verse, and a lot of occasional poetry. Most of it is no longer very accessible to contemporary readers. His lyrical and autobiographical poems and his poems about death are the most appealing to us. Bilderdijk expressed his longing for death in many verses, with titles like 'The Misery of Earthly Existence', 'Body's Decay', 'Death Bed', 'On the Edge of the Grave', and 'Burial'. But he also wrote prose, for example his *Short Account of a Remarkable Journey Through the Air and the Discovery of a New Planet* (1813). With this work, fifty years before Jules Verne, he became the author of the first Dutch science fiction novel.

His contemporaries didn't just admire his work, they were also fascinated by his life. Bilderdijk was born in Amsterdam in 1756 and grew up as a prodigy. His debut, *My Lusty Delights*, filled with erotic verse, appeared in 1781. After studying law in Leiden he settled in The Hague as a lawyer. As a fervent supporter of the Orangists, the adherents of the Prince of Orange, he became an icon of that party. His marriage to Catherina Rebecca Woesthoven wasn't a happy one. Because Bilderdijk didn't know how to handle money, his debts piled up. When the French invaded the Netherlands in 1795 and William V had to flee to England, Bilderdijk haughtily refused to swear the oath of allegiance to the new



government. It resulted in him being exiled. This not only relieved him of a bad marriage, but also of his towering debts.

In England he began an extra-marital affair with Katharina Wilhelmina Schweickhardt, twenty years his junior, whom he taught Italian and who achieved renown as a poet herself. In 1797 she followed him to Germany. Because Bilderdijk was still married, living together was initially out of the question. He lived in Brunswick, while Wilhelmina resided in Hildesheim and later in Peine, together with the children she bore. In Germany Bilderdijk made a meagre living by giving private lessons. At the weekend he visited his lover. Those rides on horseback through the German swamps were hard on him. When the divorce from his first wife came through in 1802, he was able to start living with his beloved. In March 1806 he returned to the Netherlands. In June Louis Napoleon ascended the throne. He named Bilderdijk his language tutor and court librarian. After the defeat of Napoleon and the return of the house of Orange, Bilderdijk hoped to obtain a professorship at last. That was not to be. But he continued to write poetry, up till his last breath. After the death of Wilhelmina in 1830, Bilderdijk didn't want to live any more. He died a year later, at the age of seventy-five.

Bilderdijk as a melancholic poet by Charles Howard Hodges, 1810. Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Der Arme Poet
(*The Poor Poet*)
by Carl Spitzweg,
1839. Collection Neue
Pinakothek, München



Bilderdijk the celebrity

Bilderdijk can be regarded as an early Dutch example of a literary celebrity. His contemporaries were intrigued by his eccentric appearance, his long robes and the Turkish wrap or turban to alleviate his headaches. It gave him very much the appearance of an eastern prophet. Many people were also fascinated by his excessive use of opium, which was seen as most unusual. And his infatuation with his supposed noble origins added to his unique status. Bilderdijk even maintained that he was related to the mythical Knight of the Swan, from the famous medieval tale. Many wondered if he himself believed in this background or if it was just one of the mystifications with which he tried to astound people, his urge to differentiate himself from the common herd.

In the eighteen-twenties Bilderdijk emerged more and more as an orthodox Calvinist culture critic with prophetic aspirations. He began to air opinions that many regarded as reactionary and that caused great commotion. He was, for example, against democracy and the sovereign power of the people and for an absolute monarchy; he was against relief for the poor and smallpox vaccination, but for slavery and the inherent inequality of people. With this Bilderdijk rubbed many the wrong way. At the same time he became a figurehead in the movement of what is now called the 'Réveil': the orthodox Calvinist revival movement that put feeling at the centre, waged war with the spirit of the Enlightenment and called for conversion and piety.

There is something special about Bilderdijk's case. He can certainly be seen as an example of a Calvinist celebrity. But such a characterization contains a remarkable paradox. According to the teachings of John Calvin, with predestination as a basic principle, man is but an insignificant creature compared to God – nothing more than a worm. It would therefore befit him to be humble. Yet Bilderdijk continually presented himself as an exceptional and exalted poet, someone way above the common herd. How can this paradox be explained?

Before we can answer this, we have to look at Bilderdijk's public image. Like Byron, who is often called the first literary celebrity, Bilderdijk had a 'branded

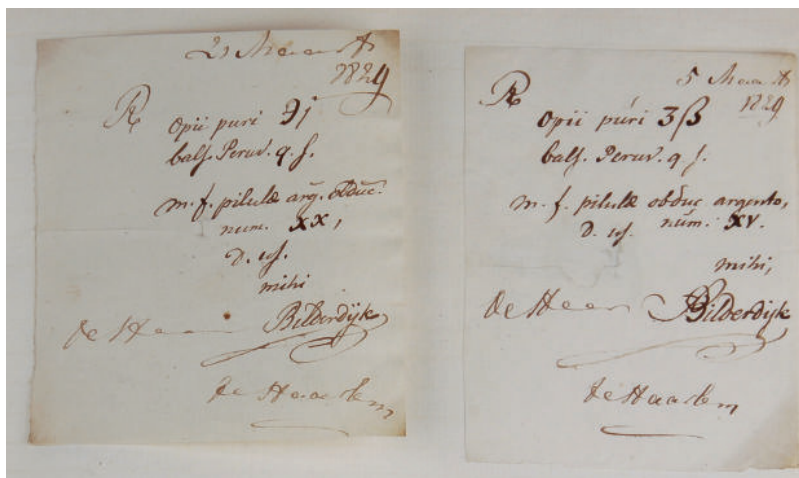
identity'. A big difference, however, was that Bilderdijk wasn't just a poet, but also an orthodox Calvinist prophet. That fits in with Thomas Carlyle's remark in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841): 'Prophet and Poet, well understood, have much kindred of meaning. Fundamentally indeed they are still the same; in this most important respect especially, That they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe'. Shakespeare especially combines both qualities, according to Carlyle: 'I feel that there is actually a kind of sacredness in the fact of such a man being sent into this Earth. Is he not an eye to us all; a blessed heaven-sent Bringer of Light?'

This could also be applied to Bilderdijk.

A brilliant melancholic

If there's one thing Bilderdijk is known for, it's his gloom and longing for death. It's an image he was himself responsible for, as he repeatedly promoted this attitude in his work. There can be no doubt that Bilderdijk must often have been truly unhappy. And he had reason to be. When he was five, a boy from next door stepped on his left foot. This brought on a painful case of periostitis and resulted in him spending the greatest part of his childhood indoors. In later life he never managed to obtain a professorship and he was much weighed down by the deaths of his children.

Even so, his melancholy can't just be explained by biographical facts. His gloom can also be seen as an integral part of his image as a poet. He was following in a tradition. Since the late eighteenth century, hypochondria, complaining about real or imaginary ailments, had been thought to be a sign of genius. Lots of authors fell prey to fits of gloom, or pretended they did. Leo Braudy, in *The Frenzy of Renown* (1986), connects this phenomenon to a growing 'urge for fame'. In the eighteenth century it became widely accepted that insanity, melancholy and genius went hand in hand. The idea was not new. In the fourth century B.C. a disquisition had been written which is generally attributed to Aristotle: *About Melancholy*. It starts like this: 'Why is it that all men who have been exceptional in philosophy, politics, literature or the arts have turned out to be melancholics?'



Personal opium recipes of Bilderdijk. Collection Bilderdijk Museum Amsterdam



Title vignette of *De voet in 't graf* (One Foot in the Grave) by Willem Bilderdijk, Rotterdam, 1827. Collection Bilderdijk Museum Amsterdam

According to Aristotle melancholy was connected to a surplus of black bile. A genius ran the risk of being plunged into melancholy, but that disposition was also a condition for achieving greatness. After 1750 melancholy became a fashionable ailment.

It's against this background that we must also interpret Bilderdijk's dejection. The theory of temperaments remained influential until late into the nineteenth century. From an early age Bilderdijk seemed very much taken by melancholy. When he was older he began to exploit it more and more as an artistic attribute. Nearly all of his letters are full of complaints about an endless list of physical and mental discomforts. He is either suffering from a 'buzzing' in the head, is short of breath, dizzy or confused, or complaining about a softening of the brain. At other times he sighs about insomnia, rheumatism, coughing, spitting blood, or pain. Bilderdijk rarely missed a chance to emphasize how ill, sad and miserable he was.

To describe his condition Bilderdijk uses ever changing metaphors. One time he calls himself a worn-out soldier, whose stiff joints prevented him from following the troops. In 1780, when someone wished him a Happy New Year, he stated that this would be impossible. One wouldn't wish an oyster good luck with his flying, or a cripple with his tightrope walking? Another time he presented himself as a miner, unable to lift a spade. In 1805 he called himself a crippled horse that would never prance again at the sound of the trumpet. Three years later he saw himself as a cat that had tumbled down from a wall. In 1810 he compared his feelings to the pain caused by a dog bite in which wasps were rooting around. And in 1825 he described himself as a cracked teapot. Bilderdijk was also fond of the images of the dehydrated cricket, the truncated tree and the trampled plant.

His longing for death flowed directly from his unease about existence. He continually made it appear as if he did not have much longer to live. His poetry greatly contributed to the image that he fostered of the nearly-dead poet. And it was also expressed in the portrait that Bilderdijk had painted of himself, in 1810, by Charles Howard Hodges. Leaning on his right arm, he sadly gazes into space.

The pose in this portrait is reminiscent of the pose in Albrecht Durer's *Melancholia I* (1514). This picture shows a winged, pondering woman, who is resting her chin on her left hand: the melancholic temperament personified. Bilderdijk was portrayed in a similar pose. It presented him the way he liked it: as a chosen one, a melancholic who had been elevated above the common herd.

The myth of poverty

A real poet is poor and lacks the basics. This has been the traditional image since the romantic period. The German artist Carl Spitzweg immortalized this image in his painting *The Poor Poet* (1839). It is remarkable to what a degree Bilderdijk managed to put this cliché into practice. But where Spitzweg meant to be ironic, Bilderdijk was deadly serious. There had, of course, been times in Bilderdijk's life when he was short of money. When, with the arrival of the French in the Netherlands in 1795, he was exiled, he was several thousand guilders in debt; in 1811 he declared bankruptcy. But this is only one side of the story, for Bilderdijk also complained about poverty when he had plenty of money coming in. In 1798, when he was living in Germany, he claimed he had been living on dry bread and water for months. His young daughter had to go barefoot, because he couldn't afford shoes. 'So what do I have to look forward to? To die of hunger.' According to him the girl was now unrecognizable, thin and dehydrated because of lack of food. That this was a pose is obvious from the letters Bilderdijk meanwhile wrote to his beloved Wilhelmina. He was continually showering her with presents: chocolate, coffee, a fur coat, a set of silver cutlery and even a pianoforte.

Bilderdijk also often complained about the cold: 'In deepest winter, with no wood in the house [...] when I can stand it no longer I leave the house and walk the circumference of the town two or three times, come home and am warm again, and continue writing my lectures. On some evenings I have to do this three or four times in order to get warm.' When you know that he gave about fifty private lessons a week, for which he was well paid, it's impossible to believe these statements.

According to him, his wife only wore 'a little cotton dress', just like his children. He claimed he had never been able to offer anyone a cup of coffee. He didn't own stockings, only pieces of cloth that he tied around his knees and that reached into his boots. At the same time we know that he ate a piece of beef or lamb every noon, with a glass of wine. The daily consumption of meat and wine was regarded as a luxury. So the poverty can't have been all that bad.

After his return to the fatherland, in 1806, Bilderdijk had nothing to complain of most of the time. King Louis Napoleon gave him an ample stipend. Nevertheless, he wrote in 1807: 'Here we are again, in a damp, dilapidated and in every respect uninhabitable hole of a house, where one can't escape the wind or the cold.' How could this be, seeing that Bilderdijk received an annual salary of more than three thousand guilders? In 1809 this amount went up to six thousand guilders even, more than a professor earned at the time! Still there are continual complaints about poverty, in his poetry as well. According to him he was living on dry bread and barley water, while his wife and child fed themselves with potatoes dipped in vinegar. During this time, Bilderdijk wrote to a friend on a Friday: 'Since

Monday I have had to take opium because I didn't have any bread.'

In later years, too, Bilderdijk kept the image of the poor poet carefully intact. While living at the fashionable Rapenburg in Leiden, between 1819 and 1823, he complained: 'Everything is old and run-down, there are cracks between the boards and even between the bricks.' So he moved, but the new house wasn't satisfactory either. It was cold, the walls were crumbling and he was troubled by smoke, draughts and dampness. But the English poet laureate Robert Southey, who in 1825 stayed for three weeks with Bilderdijk in Leiden, had a different impression: 'The house is a good one, in a cheerful street, with a row of trees and a canal in front; large, and with everything good and comfortable about it', he wrote in a letter to his wife. Apparently Bilderdijk's account wasn't entirely truthful.

This mythologizing of his poverty shows that it was an important feature of his celebrity; in this way he emphasized the image of an artist who stood outside of society. Bilderdijk turned his own life into a myth.

Divinely inspired

Bilderdijk made a name for himself as a poet with the literary societies in the second half of the eighteenth century. To that end he conformed to their views about literature and adopted the classical way of writing. He even let the members 'civilize' his work to their heart's content. Later he disdainfully distanced himself from this practice. Around 1806 Bilderdijk began to push the image of the inspired poet. 'The Art of Poetry', which he recited in 1809, is generally regarded as a milestone in this process. In it he criticized the pedants from his youth, who 'with pumice, plane and files' had ruined poetry. The true poet is a visionary. When he gets into a trance, he proclaims higher truths. In 1808 he described what happened when he was inspired. He would rise up like an eagle and see himself surrounded by lights. It should be noted that this rising up to higher spheres had a metaphysical dimension for Bilderdijk. An aesthetic experience was also a religious one for him. Bilderdijk literally believed that he was in touch with God.

To the outside world Bilderdijk made it appear that when he wrote poetry he found himself in a higher dimension, one that wasn't accessible to normal human beings. He didn't write what he wanted himself, but what a higher power dictated to him. He would be nervous and feverish and feel his heartbeat accelerating and his blood coursing faster through his veins. At such moments he felt he was inspired by God and that the poetry was coming by itself, like water from a fountain. This outpouring was comparable to an orgasm. To a friend he once graphically likened it to the way a woman in childbed pushes out the afterbirth.

The writing of true poetry was the outpouring of an overwhelming feeling, as involuntary as weeping or laughing: 'An outpouring of feeling that demands air, that has to expand, that has to communicate, that has to multiply or the heart would burst.' A real poet didn't write poetry in his armchair. That was the image Bilderdijk wanted to project. He liked to present himself as the inspired poet who spoke in verse for nights on end. But this was undoubtedly also a pose. His rough drafts tell a different story. They make it clear that Bilderdijk's poems didn't just flow faultlessly onto the paper. They are full of deletions, scribbles,

underlining and corrections. They only reached their final form after lots of sanding and editing. In short, Bilderdijk also mythologized the way he wrote his poetry.

A chosen worm

Being famous would seem to conflict with Bilderdijk's Calvinist principles, with values like humility and modesty at their core. How can we explain this paradox? Although as a Calvinist, Bilderdijk might declare that he was a worm, with his public image he made it appear that he was a messenger from God. For did he not suffer from the melancholy that was typical for a genius, did he not experience poverty the way a real poet should, and did he not receive divine inspiration? Man might be sinful and small, but this didn't really apply to Bilderdijk. He was a chosen one, who had to show his fellow men the way. And that required a special image. That's why Bilderdijk is regarded as one of the most eccentric poets in Dutch literary history. ■

Bilderdijk on his deathbed by Gerrit Jan Michaëlis,
1831. Collection Bilderdijk Museum Amsterdam



Translated by Pleunke Boyce

Two Poems

By Willem Bilderdijk



Tobacco-Smoking (1828)

He did with Godforsaken hand
Break his old father's neck indeed
Who first that fatal stinking weed
 Imported to the Fatherland.
He gave the loathsome worm-like brood
Of weak and filthy languor food
 With this brain-drugging magic dust:
He smothered muscle-power and zeal,
Robbed poor mankind of life's appeal,
 For this drunken and swooning lust. –

Where am I? In what hell of need?
 At every footstep that I take,
I breathe in horrid clouds of weed
 That make my chest and airways ache.
How my heart and my innards turn,
When all these stinking oils now burn
 And the poison spreads through the air,
Round the body with a painful sting
And does this count as catering,
 Festive greeting and kindly care? –

Oh Golden Age old folk adored
 When the traditional good cheer
New strength into the bloodstream poured
 With such tasty and wholesome beer!
Yet, France, with your poisonous brews
That both palate and taste confuse
 This poison's firm place is allowed.
Let those who like it smoke with wine;
For me that incense will not shine
 For me, I need no noxious cloud.

'Het tabakrooken'

Die heb met Godvergeten hand
Zijns grijzen vaders nek gebroken,
Die 't eerst dat heilloos stinkend rooken
 Heeft ingevoerd in 't Vaderland.
Hy gaf 't verachtlijk wormgebroedsel
Der laffe en vuile luiheid, voedsel
 In breinbedwelmingstooverrust:
Hy was 't die vlijt en spierkracht doofde,
En 't menschdom's levens waarde roofde
 Voor dronkenschap der zwijmellust. –

Waar ben ik? in wat Hel van rampen?
 Op ieder voetstap waar ik treê,
Omwalmt my't walglijk onkruid dampen,
 En doet my borst en longen wee.
Hoe keert my't hart en de ingewanden,
Wanneer dit stinkende oliebranden
 Zijn gif door heel de lucht verspreidt,
In 't lichaam om met pijnlijk wringen!
En geldt dit voor versnaperingen,
 Voor feestonthaal en lieflijkheid? –

ô Gouden tijd van onze Vaderen,
 Toen de ouderwetsche goede sier
Vernieuwde krachten stortte in de aderen
 In 't smaaklijk voedzaam garstenbier!
Doch, Frankrijk, ja by uw venijnen
Van aangezette valsche wijnen
 Heeft ook dit gif zijn rechte plaats.
Welaan, het moogwien't lust vermaken;
Voor my zal nooit die wierook blaken;
 Voor my geen stinkend dampgeblaas!

Funeral (1827)

No muffled drum
Nor mourners' hum
Must rattle rum tum
Before my bones;
No bells that thrum
From minster dumb
Must cry 'well come'
To my grave's stones;
No throng dense, glum
Walk stiff and dumb
No garland or plum
Crêpe's creases rum
Round me keep mum
My scanty bones.
My years have come
To their full sum,
Eyes dim with scum;
Age's bared gum
Calls blind and numb
To what death owns.

What should I, though,
Robbed of the glow
Of heaven's rainbow
Want here in earth's bower?
No courage or show,
No lance or bow,
No soldiers' row,
Can avert death's hour.
No dance, hoho,
No dice's throw,
No wreath or bow,
Or ruling power.
Sand may go,
Grave winds blow,
It's useless so,
To honour ash sour.
His teeth below,
Archpriest we know,
Of mankind's woe,
Will overpower.

What's this to me,
Who from chains set free,
Hope eagerly
For my faith's plea,
Calamity
May defeat in state?
I combat with glee,
Though slips we see,
HE'll sustain me,
Who can stem this spate.
No tyranny,
No raging sea,
No hellish she
Of Sophistry,
No need, if we
In Jesus' lee
Don't dare demonstrate!
His angels free
He groups to be
Guardians round our head.
No doom can desolate.

'Uitvaart'

Befloersde trom
Noch rouwgebrom
Ga romm'lende om
Voor mijn gebeente;
Geen klokgebom
Uit hollen Dom
Roep 't welleskom
In 't grafgesteente;
Geen dichte drom
Volg' stroef en stom;
Festoen noch blom
Van krepgefrom
Om 't lijk, vermomm'
Mijn schaamlekleente!
Mijn jaartal klom
Tot volle som,
Mijn oog verglom;
En de ouderdom
Roept blind en krom
Ter doodsgemeente.

Wat zoude ik thands,
Beroofd der glans
Van 's hemels trans,
Op de aard begeeren?
Geen moed des mans,
Geen spies of lans,
Geen legerschans,
Kan 't sterfuer keeren.
Geen spel of dans,
Geen dobbelkans,
Geen lauwerkrans,
Of Rijkbeheeren.
Een handvol zands
Des grafkuilrands
Is 't nietig gants,
Dat de asch mag eeren:
De beet des tands
Des Aartstyrans
Des menschenstands,
Zal 't lijk verteeren.

Doch wat 's dit my,
Die bandenvrij,
In 't uitzicht blij
Dat ik belij,
Op 't noodgetij'
Mag triomfeeren?
Ik juiche en strij';
Wat glippe of glij',
HY staat me by,
Die 't af kan weeren.
Geen dwinglandy,
Geen razerny,
Geen Helharpy
Van Sofistry,
Geen nood, dien wy
Aan Jezus zij'
Niet stout braveeren!
Zijne Englenrij
Verordent Hy
Tot wachters om ons hoofd.
Geen onheil kan ons deeren.

Three Letters



W. Bilderdijk to K.W. Schweickhardt Brunswick, 19 February 1800

My only dearest!

I have only time to tell you I am somewhat better, and convey my-self this letter to the post: yes I suffered these three days unspeakably with headache attended with some delirium. I am impatient of your intelligence. As for the present I am nearly well. Adieu, my dear all of bliss. Love me as tenderly as I love and adore you. Adieu.

W. Bilderdijk to K.W. Schweickhardt Brunswick, 6 December 1800

My soul's beloved!

Your dear longed for letter was a balm to my sad, wounded heart. Surely, my dearest, I am in the wrong torturing my-self with melancholy thoughts, which avail nothing, and which are unworthy a soul penetrated with thankfull adoration of God's all-gracious Providence; but it seems, these days of darkness of mind are the effect of that debility and illness I am fallen in and which did not leave me wholly. – As for the eruption, my beloved, I do n't perceive any more, and what was left on my hands dries up under the use of the salve. Yet I am plagued with a terrible itching, more than before; and I want opium in order to rest a few ours at night. I continue also taking daily purgatifis: and as I am sure these are indispensably wanted in our cases, I pray do n't cease the use of them, my alldearest, as well for you self, as for the dear Julius. A long time we shall be obliged taking such remedies; for there's no great probability that the body will be cleaned sufficiently before the spring, when the changement of air and food, and convenient motion, easely will restore us to a perfect health. But till then, we ought to be carefull on our-serve, that not some neglect may cause us some relaps.

My head is so embarrassed, my dearest, that I can n't write. Therefore I will conclude and bid you adieu! Embrace our lovely child for us both, and love me as fervently and tenderly as I love you, my only bliss on Earth! Adieu a thousand times!

**W. Bilderdijk to K.W. Schweickhardt
Hamburg, 13-15 March 1806**

No, nobody suffered what I am deemed to! I can n't hold the pen, nor withhold myself from crying aloud! – Heaven, see down, see down, and at least make an end of such an ill-fate! No, a life in the utmost happiness, this world could afford, would not compensate one hour of what I feel of distresses.

My fever increased violently yesterday at the lecture of your letter, and continues. Yet I had some rest to night. Heaven give, your next letter may rejoice my soul as this depressed and accabed me.
– Every fingertop is me wound and open with apostema's [abscesses], so that I can n't hold the pen.
– Adieu my soul's only delight, my heart's only love!
God be with you and our dear Children! Be quiet and love your tender and unhappy

Bilderdyk

From: *Mr. W. Bilderdijk's briefwisseling 1798-1806*.

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