Henry Van De Velde on Rational Beauty, Empathy and Ornament

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This work is dedicated to my parents, without whose unconditional support, it couldn't have seen the light.

Philadelphia, August 1998

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This provided the base from which each one of us ventured on his/her own, and resulted in a wide variety of dissertations, all well-grounded in a historical framework yet transcending that framework to propose new interpretations of different movements and figures across the historical spectrum. The intellectual climate of the program was also enriched by the diversity and engagement of several colleagues. I want to mention especially William Braham, Milton Fefferman, Terrance Galvin, Keith Evan Green, Ross Jenner, Branko Mitrovic, Nadir Lahiji, Alice Gray Read and Rebecca Williamson.

After starting my teaching career at the Lebanese American University in 1994, I continued working on my dissertation until it was completed in 1998. During my research stays in Belgium, I benefitted from the generosity of the staff at the Archives de la Litterature at the Bibliotheque Albert I in Brussels, as well as the Archives of La Cambre. My gratitude to Anne Van

Loo, Birgit Schulte, and Pierre Puttemans for responding to some of my queries. I remain thankful to the staff of the Furness Library at the University of Pennsylvania who throughout this period provided us with all the support that was needed.

During my research years, I have travelled across Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, and visited many of the buildings designed by Henry van de Velde. Some of them had been altered substantially, others survived relatively well. Unfortunately, the Tennis Club in Chemnitz was one casualty of the Second World War, but I wish to thank my friend Helge Jaeger who helped in relocating the surviving drawings at the Chemnitz Municipality, which graciously granted me the copyrights to reproduce them. My thanks to the Henry van de Velde Family Foundation for waiving the rights to reproduce some of the illustrations, and also to Mrs. Regine Carpentier from the School of La Cambre for providing the illustrations.

FOREWORD

This book is a slightly edited version of my doctoral dissertation, which was submitted in fulfillment of the PhD program requirements at the University of Pennsylvania in 1998. The study explores the different aspects of Henry van de Velde's creative activity through the study of his writings and works, specifically during the German period. Van de Velde's theoretical output is not well-known in the English world, except for a few translations, especially the counter-theses formulated during the famous debate in the 1914 Werkbund meeting in Cologne where he opposed Hermann Muthesius on the issue of standardization and artistic will.

The primary task of this study was to cast some light on his writings and realized works, and to establish their place in the foundation of Henry van de Velde's aesthetic theory, as well as to explore the major themes that recur throughout his writings, themes such as 'rational conception', 'empathy' and 'line-force'; and to establish their relation to his overall conception of the aesthetic work.

The investigation focused on the German period of Henry van de Velde, as it constituted the period of his greatest activity as a designer, teacher, and architect. This study examined the relation between his theoretical positions and his built works, and thematically addressed the different architectural works realized by the architect during this period.

The principal hypothesis of this study is that van de Velde's aesthetic theory was based on the resolution of the dialectic of rational conception and empathic will, a resolution that is set into work through the ornamental function, within an 'organic' conception of the artwork. This 'organic' conception of Beauty provides the background that allows for a better understanding of Henry van de Velde's design work and pedagogy, and his dedication to an aesthetic theory that would resist the elimination of the role of the human being in the process of creation.

Finally, the compilation of bibliographic references does not list any of the major books or articles published on this period, or on the architect/artist

himself, after 1998, which was the original date for the completion of my dissertation, with the exception of two articles that I published in the Journal of Design History and which are referenced in the bibliography.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Henry van de Velde and the Question of a New Style

In 1893, Henry van de Velde made his first piece of applied art: a tapestry that metaphorically represented his view of the world. It depicted a newborn infant laying on the grass in the middle of the woods surrounded by four women in religious attendance. The child, in this hieratic environment, symbolized the anticipated "new style" awakening from the slumber of the historicist centuries to reclaim a direct relation with nature. A swirling line dominates the composition, it indicates a road, sinuous and meandering, which englobes the attending women and forces the trees to bend in harmony. The tapestry was given the evocative title *Veillée d'anges*, or *Angels' Watch*, although in some accounts it appeared as *L'adoration de l'Enfant*. In one of his first lectures, the *Déblaiemnt d'art,* van de Velde announced a new artistic epoch in the making, which necessitated a total cleansing and purification, for the "new child" to be born. He declared:

> La route que nous suivrons est le resplendissant fleuve d'or que le soleil trace dans la vaste mer et qui mène à l'immense brasier purificateur qu'il allume tous les soirs. C'est le rideau de feu que l'Art traversera afin de se purifier et de se dépouiller de toutes les abominations qui l'ont souillé.
>
> Et quand appararaîtra là-bas le royal enfant en sa fascinante nudité de vierge; les peuples confesseront leur erreur et puis seront en délire.
>
> Et les artistes se mettront à l'oeuvre.[1]

[1] *Déblaiement d'art*, 26.

The road that we shall follow is the radiant golden river that the sun traces in the vast sea, which leads to the immense purifying inferno that it lights

This message, with its prophetic and moralistic tone, would mark the discourse of van de Velde until the end of his life. His theoretical writings would constantly revert back to this rebellion against common taste, historicism, and the imitation of styles. Yet, unlike Adolf Loos, the other major protagonist of the period who led his own battle against the proliferation of styles, van de Velde firmly believed, perhaps influenced by his readings of Nietzsche, that the battle of styles must lead eventually to their supplementation by the unique style, the one that would most appropriately express the culture of the 'new man' of the twentieth century. This *new Style* would be the principal task of a contemporary aesthetics, one that would bring together the opposite poles of rational conception, associated with machine production; and ornament, which acts as the principle of individuation assuring the emancipation of the work to the level of an artwork. This paradoxical proposition was not, as we will see, the only problematic in van de Velde's theory, but even his call for a new style was at some moments attenuated by his cautionary remarks against novelty and the "idea of the new." But first, what was the background of van de Velde's attachment to this notion of style, while others, from Loos to Muthesius had eliminated it from their considerations with a clear conscience?

The question of style was the question of the nineteenth century, a century that was at a loss to define its own style in the context of an eclectic culture threatened by the recent relativization of traditions as well as the advances of new technologies. The activity of archeologists in the previous century had in fact started to pose a challenge to existing models and began to appear in architectural compendia such as Johann Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurff einer historischen Architektur* (1725). And despite the relative success of Johann Winckelmann in reestablishing the possibility of a reinterpretation of the classical ideal of Greece, at least in Germany, his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764) having influenced

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every evening. It is the curtain of fire that Art will pass through to purify itself and to rid itself of all the abominations that defiled it.

And when the royal child will appear over there, in his fascinating virginal nakedness; the people will confess their error and will then be delirious. And the artists will start their work.

architects like Friedrich and Friedrich Schinkel and the next generation of theorists like Karl Bötticher, this attempt clearly met with obstacles as the debate on style led by Heinrich Hübsch's epitomic essay testified.[2] In Germany specifically, where van de Velde's activity would later develop, the debate on style seemed to constellate between two poles; the Greek and the Gothic, with a few architects trying to forge other ways which evade this opposition. Among those, Gottfried Semper presented one of the most original and controversial theses on the style question. For Semper, architecture had roots that went beyond the specific culture of Greece, reaching to pre-history and the earliest human industrial activity; the question therefore extended beyond a simple formalism, to address the 'principles' and original motifs of architecture, i.e. its 'organic' principles.[3]

Among the major texts that followed Semper's study on style and as a counterthesis to its proposals, Alois Riegl would in a few years respond in his *Stilfragen* to the neo-Semperian allegations that all ornaments, and consequently styles, developed out of a mechanical, industrial process which evaded the role played by the individual free will, or *Kunstwollen*. As the manuscript on ornament on which van de Velde worked between 1915 and 1935 shows, it is these questions that continued to preoccupy the artist who by now had established his position as a leader of an avant-garde movement in art and architecture. And it was precisely between the two opposite positions of Semper and Riegl that he attempted to find his own place. Van de Velde had therefore inherited the question of style from the previous century, yet infused it with his own particular vision, refusing to abandon its essentially humanistic origins in the activity of human craft. Among the characteristics of his notion of style, the organic attribute

[2] *In What style should we build? The German Debate on Architectural Style. Heinrich Huebsch et.al.* Introduction and translation by Wolfgang Hermann. Getty Publications, 1992.

[3] Semper further dedicated a lengthy study to the subject of style, which sought to examine this subject under four major headings: textiles, ceramics, tectonics and stereotomy. In his major section on textiles, Semper hinted that the origin of ornamental motifs was not in some premeditated idea or intention, but in the technique of the industry itself. Yet in a lecture few years later, Semper reaffirmed that human free will was the most important factor in the creation of a new style. For more on Semper, see H.F. Mallgrave's *The Idea of Style: Gottfried Semper in London* (1983).

appeared under various designations, sometimes in the description of the ‘organs’ of the artwork, at other times in its anima or movement. This notion merits some clarification before discussing van de Velde's own interpretation of it.

The notion of the organic was itself grounded on the discovery of biological studies in the nineteenth century which transformed the body from a classical model of mathematical proportions to a working system of different functions, an organism that shares similar functions with animal and plant life. These had multiple repercussions on art and architectural theory. First, Lodoli made the analogy between the human body and the artifact-building suggesting a "visible working out of its mechanical forces, its functions," while Cuvier's classification of plants according to their organic functions left its mark on the architectural discourses of Semper, Owen Jones, and others.[4]

Goethe's search through the varieties of plant forms, on the other hand, was for the archetypal forms -the *Urpflanze* - from which all formal variations derived. In practical application to art, Goethe saw a metaphorical relationship between art and natural life, as in his celebration of the Gothic cathedral of Strasbourg as a "tree of God". This perception of matter as living was not restricted to Gothic. When Goethe later embraced Greek classical architecture, he saw in it too an architecture that not only emanates life, but to which one can impart life, long before empathy became a common term. From these different interpretations emerged a third possibility that drew a relationship between animate life and inanimate matter, finding in all a manifestation of some underlying common factor: the will in some cases, the spirit in others.

It is precisely this understanding of architecture as an organic, animated body, that would separate van de Velde from the other protagonists at the turn of the century. One may be surprised to find many parallel themes and arguments in two figures as opposed as Henry van de Velde and Hermann Muthesius. Van de Velde, writing at the same time as Muthesius's polemical essay “Stilarchitektur und Baukunst”, also rejected the eclectic architecture of the nineteenth century, called for a revival of

[4] Joseph Rykwert. "Organic and mechanical" in RES, Autumn 1992, (11-18). On organicism and its influence on nineteenth century theory, see also *Caroline van Eck's Organicism in nineteenth-century architecture* (1994).

arts and crafts following the English model, praised the new engineering constructions and hoped for an architecture of pure forms, unencumbered by previous styles. Yet they differed on this question of style. For van de Velde, the simplification of the artwork could not be an end in itself, this reification may become an aesthetic end if it resulted from the dematerialization of ornament in the process of design itself, rather than its a-priori elimination. Ornament thus played an important role as the link between the artwork and the human being who shapes it, and the one who later perceives it. The conception of style was due in greater part, in van de Velde's theory, to ornament, which further gave the work its organic characteristics. This organic work would thus be one aspect of this new Style which would reclaim its true artistic role in a period pregnant with social ideals and technical potentials. Whereas Muthesius advocated the banning of styles and a *sachlich* art and architecture, essentially a materialist conception of form similar to van de Velde's *rational conception*, the latter's qualification of this notion resulted in a more nuanced message, ambiguous yet rich in implications.

In a rough diagram, van de Velde's ideas seem to cross and combine many nineteenth century theories, syntactically weaving a concept of style that based itself on Owen Jones's call for a new style that does not imitate the past ones, whose rational conception was indebted to William Morris and Walter Crane, and whose forms would be animated by a certain vital force, after Nietzsche. This new style would renew with the tradition of the ‘eternally new’, of ‘pure forms’ that reoccur throughout the different historical periods, whenever the human rational conception coincided with an inner artistic impulse. Style, according to van de Velde was born at the moment when humanity began to fathom its first weapons and tools and constituted a common link between successive generations which developed these utilitarian forms, animated by the human spirit. In one of his later essays on the ‘New’, van de Velde reiterated his argument:

> Ne serait-ce pas le moment de crier à ces novateurs de profession que la "leçon du nouveau" nous vient du fond de l'Humanité; que sa source est dans la réflexion, dans la déduction, dans la recherche de la solution la plus radicale et tout à la fois la plus satisfaisante de la forme et de la construction par rapport à l'usage propre à tout ce que nous créons. L'avenir du nouveau n'est assuré que pour autant qu'il puise à la source

éternelle par le moyen éternel! On ne crée, on ne trouve du nouveau que sur le plan de l'éternité.[5]

The notion of style was dismissed and shelved in the following century, replaced by other paradigms. Yet this transformation did not pass without major conflicts. In Germany specifically, the debate crystallized in the Werkbund conferences, where the main protagonists were Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde. The issue of individuality, a pillar of the new artistic style, was at the root of the Werkbund division between those who supported Muthesius's program of *Typisierung*, or standardization; and the others led by van de Velde who maintained the artist's primordial role in the creative process. In retrospect, it is not hard to understand the reasons for van de Velde's opposition to Muthesius's standardization. In van de Velde's view, a new artistic culture must emerge from a revived awareness of the organic relation between things and the forces that shape them. This would eliminate any total concession to a purely material process, for that would constitute the most flagrant affront to human nature, to creativity, to that will evoked by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In this situation, the artist takes on a sacral function, playing the role of the mid-wife, of the priest, or of the attending woman in the Angels Watch. His task would be to bring about the new style, purified from the corruption of the past centuries, with the ultimate aim being the reconquest of an eternal beauty. For this, any determinism, whether the determinism of the mechanical process or that of the historicist traditions must be avoided.

Van de Velde's ultimate aim, through this new style, was to reach the ideal of "Beauty". This other concept benefited from an increasing attention in the idealist and romanticist atmosphere of the eighteenth and

[5] *Le Nouveau,* (1929), Reprinted in *Déblaiement D'Art*, (1979), 90-1.
Isn't it time that we call the attention of those professional innovators that the "lesson of the new" comes to us from the origin of Humanity; that its source is in reflection, in the deduction, in the search for the most radical, and simultaneously most satisfactory solution of form and construction in relation to the usage for which it is created. The future of the new can only be guaranteed as long as it would draw into the eternal source through the eternal means! We can only create and find the new on the plane of eternity.

nineteenth centuries. Van de Velde occasionally spoke of a "rational beauty", yet his interpretation of beauty transcended any positivism and was again more indebted to metaphysical associations. The initial thrust of his conception of beauty owed a lot to Ruskin, who had given a moral and religious tone to the notion of beauty since the first volume of his *Modern Painters*. And although Ruskin's anti-utilitarian beauty gave reasons for van de Velde to dissociate himself from his theory, the bottom line remained common to both: beauty was a moral matter which answered the spiritual needs of Humanity and could not therefore be divorced from the domain of art and architecture.

Van de Velde's understanding of Beauty was not free from paradoxes. In the same writings he praised the ideal beauty of the Parthenon, the mechanical beauty of machines, as well as the more romantic beauty of nature. His love poem ‘AMO’ combined all these images in a prose of Ruskinian overtones. In that poem, his first declaration was a confession of love for the "flowers, which are the eyes of the earth...", its third for the bodies of human beings and animals, while its seventh was for the spectacles of nature in all its variety, its thirteenth for the machines, "creatures at the higher level of incarnation... like Buddhas sitting in contemplation over the eternal lotus", to conclude with the beauty of Hyde Park in May![6]

Yet his apparent contradictions did have an underlying foundation which remained rather coherent throughout his career. This foundation, in summary, was based on a conception of organic beauty in which the opposite notions of rational conception and empathy found their dialectical resolution. The various writings provide glimpses of this concept of beauty, which at some points stressed the rational conception and at others the artistic impulse that breathes life into inert matter. In the end, what he aimed for was the nobler end of artistic creation, i.e. to reach towards a form that appears as a manifestation of the spirit. This was clearly outlined in an article discussing the "Rational and Consequent Conception", written shortly after his departure from Weimar:

> The formula of rational and consequent conception tends spontaneously

[6] *AMO* (1909) Republished in *Formules*, (1978), 38-41.

> towards the discovery of the form that is most adequate to the usage that we expect from it. It avoids any participation of fantasy or sentimentality. Thanks to the rule of the rational and consequent conception, the reign of "travesty" to which all forms were subjected would be definitely closed [...]
>
> Fantasy and sentimentality were trying hard to travestise, to mask the forms instead of leaving them naked, thus spoiling them. In order to be beautiful - in the sense of the purest acceptance of the term- the forms must appear like phenomena that surge spontaneously from our spirit; radiant like a naked body and naked members; or like trees, mountains and rivers born in the midst of nature![7]

This definition of the beautiful came quite a few years before Le Corbusier's definition of architecture as a "pure creation of the spirit." The metaphors imply an ideal of permanence that recalls again Nietzsche's eternal forms. These forms that surge from the spirit, that are co-extant with the human spirit, are closer to this Nietzschean perception of art than to the Romantics' idyllic nature elevated as an object of pure contemplation, at a distance from the human perceiver. In van de Velde's view, nature should not exclude human artifice, this activity that goes back to primitive, pre-historic times, as the Altamira paintings show. Rather it is the site of an active engagement where humans fathom out of the raw material the forms that reach out towards beauty. Beauty went beyond simple intellectual formulations, it escaped these artificial bounds of the intellect:

> C'est dans ses rapports directs avec les matières que la Beauté touche à la jouissance la plus profonde de la vie; en elles, elle trouvera la révélation de tous les mystères: ceux de l'éveil et ceux de l'évanouissement, [...] L'idée n'a jamais fécondé que l'idée; elle ne peut féconder les matières dont sont faits le tableau, la statue, le poême, la symphonie ou l'édifice![8]

Van de Velde's version of beauty, after its initial setting on Ruskin's moral foundation and its association to a rational conception indebted to Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement, became further infused with a

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[7] "La Conception rationelle et conséquente" in *Schweizerische Bauzeitung* (1918), 150. (My translation)
[8] *Formules* (1978) Op. Cit., 51-2.

Nietzschean idealism that projected it into the realm of the spirit.

Principal Theoretical Writings

The primary task of this study will be to examine van de Velde's writings, concentrating on the *Formules de la Beauté Architectonique Moderne*, which summarizes his ideas of the German period, and the Manuscript on Ornament which developed at the end of that period and throughout the next decade, but was never published. In the former, the different texts were mature revisions of earlier articles or conference papers intended to give a comprehensive account of his theoretical position at the time, a position that appeared ambivalently poised between rational conception and empathy. In the manuscript, however, van de Velde tried to define a practical aesthetics, something akin to Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament*, with important indications that help clarify his earlier theoretical positions.

His writings reveal the struggle of someone who could not accept divorcing architectural praxis from the realm of a more general theory of aesthetics, and specifically from a nineteenth century understanding of aesthetics. This struggle seems to me the primary cause of his apparent ambiguity, or ambivalence, which led certain critics to question the coherence of these writings. Even a sympathetic Ernesto Rogers commented that:

> [...] owing to his character which was at once passionate and rational - and therefore contradictory in itself- a criticism of the man and his work cannot be carried off in convenient schemes, in acceptance or refusal of the definitions he formulated in theory, or of the practical consequences of his work, for he was either indifferent or not in a position to reconcile systematically the various and contrasting forces of which he was both spectator and actor.[9]

This criticism is to a large extent true. The analysis of van de Velde's work may not be easily carried out in convenient schemes, and he was perhaps unable at that time to reconcile his thoughts nor translate them into architecture, for a number of reasons. Yet a common quest does seem

[9] in *Casabella* 237, March (1960), VII.

to run through these writings, even if their translation into architecture appears to be problematic. The complete bibliography of Henry van de Velde's writings shows the impressive output of this artist turned theoretician, in addition to developing later as designer and architect.[10] It is hard to explain the obscurity of these writings in the English-speaking world, or the continuing discreditation by certain scholars of this enigmatic figure.[11]

This chapter will present the sequence of these writings within the personal and social context in which they appeared. Henry van de Velde began his career as an artist in his native Belgium, taking an active part in the emerging avant-garde movements in art and literature. Born to a comfortable bourgeois family in the Flemish city of Antwerp in 1863, his sensibility developed at an early age in close company with his lifelong friend the mystical and symbolic poet Max Elskamp.[12] As children, they

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[10] The writings of van de Velde appeared first in different periodicals such as Meier-Graefe's *L'Art moderne* and *Pan.* Other articles appeared in *La Société Nouvelle*, *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, *Dekorative Kunst* and other French & German periodicals. Few articles appeared in Flemish. Most of this literary output was often translated from French, his favored language of expression, into German. Thus, most of his writings appear as duplicates in these two principal languages. His writings cannot be easily categorized into distinct periods, for van de Velde often resorted to the same ideas and themes, and some of his "books" were simply collections of different lectures, or previously published articles that had appeared individually in periodicals.

Another type of publication in the last decade of the century, was the single article in pamphlet format published in limited number. Van de Velde occasionally used this venue, as for instance for his *Déblaiement d'Art* republished in 1894 in a limited print of 150 copies, at the Press of Mrs. Monnom in Brussels.

[11] There are very few works that attempted to address the theoretical output of van de Velde in detail. Only three studies, one by by Henry Lenning at New York University 1940; a second one by Clemens Resseguier at Zurich University in 1955; and another by Günther Stamm in Göttingen in 1969, specifically address this aspect. Lenning's and Stamm's dissertations are more general, though useful overviews of van de Velde's written & built work separately addressed, whereas Rességuier addresses the written work exclusively and chronologically organizes it with a limited crtitique of the major concepts behind van de Velde's theory. Rességuier casts doubts in his conclusion over the importance of van de Velde's theoretical input: "Seine Schriften sind keine systematisch aufgebauten Theorien, sondern Programme, Predigten, Aufrufe oder Pamphlete" 76.

[12] A. M. Hammacher stresses in his study the importance of Elskamp on the development of van de Velde. According to Hammacher, it is Elskamp who first

would spend hours at the port of Antwerp in a district that "evoked their nostalgia for faraway places, separated by the mist of the sea and the vapors of the boats leaving port." The youthful spirit of these boys was nurtured by such places, as he would later narrate in his autobiography, rather than by "the academic monotony of the school."[13]

An incident that characterized van de Velde's problematic relationship with his father marked him for the rest of his life and terminated his ambitions of becoming a musician.[14] Later, he joined the art academy of Antwerp to study painting in 1880 and continued to study in the atelier of the academy's director, Charles Verlat.[15] Punctuated by a period of study in Paris where he was joined by his friend Elskamp, this time was also that of a personal reevaluation of his career plans and his role as an artist.[16] He discovered the message of Millet, who "corresponds best to the image that

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exposed van de Velde to the pathos of the artist's solitary stand against a misunderstanding society. Elskamp offered him also the opportunity to meet Mallarmé and Verlaine among other poets and writers. Elskamp however did not share van de Velde's longing for the countryside life, the cities being the place that sustained his pathos. Hammacher also discusses at length the artistic context of van de Velde's education in art, and the influence of that on his personality. See A. M. Hammacher, *Le Monde de Henry van de Velde*, (1967), 111-112.

[13] Récit de ma Vie, I. (1992), 65-6.

[14] The story of van de Velde's childhood was marked, as he told it in his Recit, by a profound attachment to the family. Van de Velde confessed an obcession to remain the chosen favorite of his mother, and to win the withheld affection of his father. The incident that turned him away from music, was his father's outrage at finding the young Henry using the pharmacy's stationary to write his compositions, which the strict father then threw into the chimney fire, leaving the young boy in shock. *Récit de ma Vie* I, 47 – 67.

[15] Charles Verlat was a student of Nicolas de Keyser and Gustave Wappers. From 1869 to 1874, he would direct the art school of Weimar. *Récit de ma Vie*, I, 71-3. Hammacher relates that van de Velde was afterward very critical of Verlat and his method of teaching. He also places the correct date of his presence in his studio at 1883- 1884, and not from 1880 to 1883 when he was registered as a student at the Academy. See Hammacher, 27.

[16] It was again Elskamp who first brought him in contact with the notion of nothingness. Van de Velde related in his memoires how Elskamp, before moving to Paris, burned all his previous poetry, throwing himself in front of the "immensity of nothingness". He quoted him as saying:
"Quand cela a fini de brûler, je me suis senti soulagé; il me semble que j'ai rompu avec la tradition et je suis à présent devant l'immensité du rien, n'osant toucher à rien de peur de retomber sur le chemin de tous." *Récit de ma Vie,* I. 80.

I had of the artist's existence and the sacrifices it entails."[17] Millet's solitary life and his diligent work in depicting the farmer left a strong impression on van de Velde who would later dedicate a lecture to this very theme: "The farmer in painting."[18]

On his return to Belgium, van de Velde moved to Wechel der Zande to live the ideal of Millet, an ideal firmly rooted in the romantic tradition of the nineteenth century, also following the example of the three Flemish painters Heymans, Rosseels and Crabeels.[19] There he led a secluded life, like a "prophet in the midst of common people." He recorded in his memoirs the life of the village with an acute sensibility:

> De la chambre que j'occupais, comme de la grande salle commune où je prenais tous mes repas, je participais à la vie de la place. Le va-et-vient déterminait le rythme de la vie du village. L'arrivée espacée des chariots amenant les sacs de blé devant la maison du meunier, le transport modeste d'un seul sac de farine sur une brouette, l'entrée ou la sortie d'une villageoise ou d'un enfant, l'apparition subite de quelque passant ou d'une voiture éveillaient impérieusement la curiosité et suscitaient des questions [...]. Chaque jour, de manière régulière, des groupes de travailleurs partaient aux champs ou en rentraient pour les repas. A l'époque des moissons, des charrettes chargées de foin, de blé, de sacs de pommes de terre ou de betteraves encombraient la place. Quant à la maison de Dieu, insipide construction de briques rouges, elle ne s'éveillait qu'à l'heure des offices. Le dimanche, elle attirait une foule nombreuse et parée. Selon que l'heure pressait ou non, elle se dirigeait vers le portail avec recueillement et majesté ou de manière débandée et agitée. Après chaque sortie, l'église se rendormait brusquement comme une vieille femme fatiguée de raconter des histoires. Seul le mouvement de la grande horloge continuait à se faire entendre, régulier et persistant. Durant les trois années de mon

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[17] *Récit de ma Vie*, I. 81.

[18] "Du Paysan en Peinture", published in part in L'art moderne, February 22, 1891; and republished in full in L'Avernir social in Aug-Oct 1892, and as "Der Bauer in der Malerei" in Die Insel, Oct-Dec 1900. Initially it was pronounced as a conference in February 1891 in Antwerp and Brussels, and again in March of the same year in Antwerp, and in July of 1892 in the Hague. See *Récit de ma Vie,* I footnote pages 81, 167.

[19] Adrien- Joseph Heymans, Jacques Rosseels and Florent Crabeels, three artists who were the masters of the "School of Calmpthout" and the painters of Wechel der Zande, a generation before van de Velde.

séjour dans ce village, j'entendis ainsi battre son coeur à toutes les heures du jour, à toutes celles de la nuit.[20]

The whole text of the *Récit* is rich with such poetic narratives, betraying a deep sensibility and an acute observation and recollection of things and events. The fact that these memoirs were written towards the end of his life does not put into question their authenticity, even if they come revised and polished with occasional lacunas and chronological errors. Van de Velde's retrospective self-perception of his role as a missionary performing a sacred function at Wechel der Zande, in pursuit of a genuine artistic representation of the world would permeate his whole life and directly influence his first 'apostolic' pronouncements. A series of emotional setbacks,[21] including the death of his mother in the summer of 1888,[22] culminated in a depressive and nearly suicidal period which led to

[20] See *Récit de ma Vie,* I 101- 103.

"From the room that I occupied, as from the large common room where I had all my meals, I participated in the life of the public square. The comings and goings determined the rythm of the life of the village. The regular arrival of carts bringing the wheat to the mill house, the humble carrying of one bag of flour on a wheelbarrow, the arrival and departure of a woman farmer or a child, the sudden apparition of some passerby or of a car, suddenly awoke curiosities or evoked suspicions[...]. Every day, in a regular manner, groups of workers went to the fields and returned for dinner. During harvest time, carts loaded with hay, wheat, bags of potatoes or beets filled the square. As to the house of God, insipid construction of red bricks, it only awoke at the times of the service. On Sunday, it attracted a large crowd. According to whether the time was pressing or not, the crowd moved through the portal with reverence and dignity, or in a disorganized and agitated manner. After every departure, the church would go abruptly back to sleep like an old woman who got tired of telling her stories. Only the movement of the big clock continued to be audible, regular and persistant. During the three years of my stay in that village, I heard her heartbeat in this way at all the times of the day, at all the times of the night." (My translation)

[21] Worth mentioning is the failed attempt to win the heart of Misia Godebska, who inspired many artists of the period, and finally settled in Paris where her Salon was frequented by the writers and artists of the day. See *Récit de ma Vie*, I, footnote p. 141.

[22] During a whole year that he dedicated to care for his ailing mother, van de Velde continues his readings that began at Wechel der Zande. He read Nietzsche "dont la violence me nourissait mieux que la nourriture réelle". In parallel he read the Bible

a time of rest at his sister's house in Calmpthout, in the countryside in the north of Belgium.[23] Yet van de Velde used this time of recovery to continue his readings of foundational texts: The *Bible*, he mentioned specifically the "Sermon on the Mount", the "Song of Songs", the "Ecclesiast", and the "Apocalypse"; Bakounine's *Dieu et L'Etat*, Thomas a Kempis's *L'Imitation de Jesus Christ*, Karl Marx's *Manifesto*, Kropotkine's *Paroles d'un Révolté*, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Saint Francis's *Fioretti*, and Dostoïevski's *Brothers Karamazov.* Van de Velde claimed that his search throughout these readings was after one substance: "the revolt against the egoism of the end-of-the-century society and against the privileges of the dominant classes":

> Dès ce moment, l'idée d'un régime social nouveau et de la place qui y serait réservée à l'art et l'artiste ne cessa de me préoccuper, prévalant sur ma conviction que l'évolution de la peinture ne pourrait s'accomplir que dans la stricte observance des lois de la physique moderne. Ma foi s'estompa en la légitimité d'une profession artistique dont le rôle social serait restreint. J'aspirais à une action plus universelle et j'acquis la conviction que celui qui ne se rend utile qu'à quelques-uns est bien près de ne rendre service à personne.[24]

Those readings constituted a theoretical framework that would shape his vision of the world. It is not marginal to note here the influence of such novels as Charles de Coster's *La Légende d'Ulenspiegel* (1867), a tale of a rebellious and irreverent Flemish youth who challenges the hierarchies of

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whose "elementary wisdom" contained in the words of the old patriarchs had a soothing and reassuring effect on him. *Récit de ma Vie*, I. 104-107.

[23] *Récit de ma Vie*, I 104-113 & 139-152.

[24] *Récit de ma Vie*, I 147-149.

> "From that moment on, the idea of a new social order and of the place that would be reserved in it to art and to the artist did not cease from preoccupying me, prevailing over my earlier conviction that the evolution of painting could only happen in the strict observance of the laws of modern physics. My faith faded in the legitimacy of an artistic profession whose social role would be restrained. I aspired towards a more universal action, and I acquired the conviction that a person who would only be useful to a few is rather unfit to give service to anyone."

(My translation)

What is meant here by the "laws of modern physics" is most probably his contemporary attraction towards the scientific theories of Seurat.

his time in his native Flanders.[25] The intense influence of the written word on van de Velde was expressed a number of times in his memoirs.[26] Recounting certain episodes in his life, his call towards the mission of social reform and artistic renewal often recurred. At a reading by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam of parts of his *Légende Moderne* in Belgium in the early part of 1888, he recalled:

> [Villiers de L'Isle-Adam] prononça l'épitaphe [...] d'un ton inoubliable, solennel et autoritaire. Les mots de l'adieu d'Isabelle la Catholique à Christophe Colomb partant à la découverte du Nouveau Monde se fixèrent dans ma mémoire de manière indélébile: "Va devant toi! Et, si la terre que tu cherches n'est pas créée encore, Dieu la fera jaillir pour toi des mondes du néant, afin de justifier ton audace". Ce furent des moments dont je me rappelai toute ma vie le climat, des moments où j'éprouvai la satisfaction vengeresse de cette haine que je n'ai cessé de vouer à la médiocrité, à la suffisance du bourgeois, en l'occurence le "bienfaiteur", face à "l'artiste ingrat".[27]

This rebellious romanticism found all the necessary ingredients for its development into the later messianic role: an artistic vacuum at the end of the century, a personal disappointment with life, a Christian-inspired belief in redemption, and the discovery of Nietzsche. All these conditions were conducive to the fermentation of an apostolic message and were to be

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[25] Van de Velde gave the names of its heroes Thyl & Nèle to his children. *Récit de ma Vie*, I , Op.cit. 99.

[26] Hammacher also stresses the importance of his literary sources: Elskamp, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire. These added a foundational base to his artistic disposition nourished by the examples of Millet, van Gogh, Seurat and Heymans. See Hammacher, *Chapter 1*, 11-71.

[27] *Récit de ma Vie*, I , Op. cit.137.

> "[Villiers de L'Isle-Adam] pronounced the epitaph [...] in an unforgettable tone, solemn and authoritarian. The words of Isabelle-the-Catholic to Christopher Columbus on his way to the discovery of the New World were fixed in an indelible manner in my mind: "Go forth! And, if the land you are searching for is not yet created, God will make it surge before you out of nothingness, to justify your audacity." Those were moments which I remembered all my life, moments when I experienced the vengeful satisfaction of this hatred that I never ceased to carry against mediocrity, against the arrogance of the bourgeois, a case in point the "benefactor" facing the "ungrateful artist"." (My translation)

given further impetus by the appearance of the first real interlocutor and convert to his message: Maria Sèthe, his future wife.[28]

The closure of this first period of development and gestation led to the second phase when van de Velde became aware of the financial obligations of founding a home and the difficulties of continuing his vocation as a painter. He reformulated his artistic mission and its first fruit appeared in 1893 in a course that he gave at the Antwerp Academy where, as he put it later, he could "pursue the crusade and preach the conversion."[29] This period was marked by his marriage to Maria Sèthe. The ideal of beauty was reinterpreted then as that of a simple life that the artist would live with his wife:

> [...] nous étions prêts pour la lutte que nous allions engager contre l'une des dépravations les plus néfastes, l'une des infections les plus virulentes qui rongeaient les chairs vives de l'humanité: la laideur. De jour en jour, madame Sèthe partageait davantage l'image de la vie simple, à l'abri d'un foyer modeste, que nous voulions mener et que nous évoquions devant elle. La vrai nature et le vrai caractère de Maria se révélaient, délivrés enfin des contraintes mondaines et de l'incompréhension qui avaient jusqu'alors pesé sur son existence de jeune fille.[30]

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[28] Van de Velde met Maria via his friend Théo van Rysselberghe, who was her teacher. She was a woman of Scottish descent, born in Paris to a German mother. The Marriage to Maria Sèthe followed an interesting episode of intellectual friendship and courtship culminating in Maria's confession to Velde of her willingness to follow him and help him in his struggle. Following his lending her of Ibsen's Brand, in which a pastor faces the dilemma between his duty and his love for a woman, Maria Sèthe returned the book with a note that said: "I am that woman who wishes your happiness, at any price, and who made up her mind to follow you in your struggle, even if it were hopeless". Van de Velde spoke of the new confidence given to him by this first convert, his future wife, to continue in his call as a pastor who will lead people to art, a pastor who forsakes all the pleasures of life except, as he puts it, those given by the reading of the Fleurs du Mal and some chapters in the Bible.
Récit de ma Vie, I. 213- 219.

On the role played by Maria Sèthe in van de Velde's career, see also Birgit Schulte's "Ich bin diese Frau, die um jeden Preis Ihr Glück will ..." in Henry van de Velde, Ein Europäischer Künstler seiner Zeit. 95-117.

[29] In the autobiography, this section is titled “La Mission Artistique". *Récit de ma Vie*, I 207.

[30] *Récit de ma Vie*, I 223.