'OUTSIDE GOD, THERE IS NOTHING':
SWAMMERDAM, SPINOZA, AND THE JANUS-FACE OF
THE EARLY DUTCH ENLIGHTENMENT

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I. Introduction

On 12 August 1675, the French *érudit* Henri Justel wrote to Henri Oldenburg, the secretary of the Royal Society, that Jan Swammerdam 'est tout a fait dans la devotion'.¹ The rumour proved right. Oldenburg’s Dutch correspondent and the author of the pioneering *Historia generalis insectorum* (1669) had just abandoned his microscopic research, destroyed some of his manuscripts, and decided to follow what he now considered his real vocation, the worship of God.²

In the summer of 1675, Swammerdam had left Amsterdam for Schleswig-Holstein to become a member of the spiritual community run by the mystical prophetess Antoinette Bourignon. As a farewell to the material world, Swammerdam published his treatise on the mayfly, the *Ephemeri vita.*³ ‘Ce livre la est plein de speculations metaphysiques et Theologiques’, an annoyed Justel remarked to Oldenburg, ‘ce qui ennuye ceux qui n’ont pour but que de connaître la Nature’.⁴ Indeed, only a fraction of the work is devoted to the mayfly’s delicate anatomy. The treatise mainly consists of pious meditations on the idleness, even sinfulness of science in general and Swammer-

⁴ See note 1.
dam’s own research in particular. Swammerdam’s discoveries had initially brought him closer to God, he wrote, but now he feared his pursuits were bordering on the idolatrous. He decided to turn away from the ‘fruit of the forbidden tree of science’, and solely worship the Lord.5

A few weeks after Oldenburg learned that Swammerdam was lost to the scientific community, more news from Holland arrived. Again, it concerned matters of reason and faith. This time it was a letter from Benedictus Spinoza, who informed his friend that the editorial preparations for the new work ‘about which I wrote to you’ were delayed: ‘While I was busy with this, a rumour was spread everywhere that some book of mine about God was in the press, and that in it I tried to show that there is no God (...) When I understood this from certain trustworthy men, I decided to postpone the edition I was preparing until I saw how things would turn out’.6 As is well known, Spinoza would never see this work, the Ethica, in print. Two years later, in 1677, the philosopher died. The Ethica was to form the most offensive part of Spinoza’s generally abhorred Opera posthuma (1677).7 The book was almost immediately banned by the States General and subsequently acquired enduring fame as one of the most heretical works ever published.8

In learned circles both Swammerdam’s religious zeal and Spinoza’s alleged atheism did not pass unnoticed, as is illustrated not only by Oldenburg’s correspondence, but also by other sources.9 At first

5 Swammerdam, Ephemeris vita, 245.
6 Spinoza to Oldenburg, September/October 1675, CHO, XI, 482.