

E. M. Beekman. *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600 - 1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 654 pp.

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In the Netherlands, Dutch colonial literature as a field of research has attracted a great deal of attention over the last fifteen years. The starting point for this attention has undoubtedly been Rob Nieuwenhuys's literary history published in 1972 (3rd revised edition 1978, 669 pp). His *Oost-Indische Spiegel. Wat Nederlandse schrijvers en dichters over Indonesië hebben geschreven, vanaf de eerste jaren der Compagnie tot op heden* (Mirror of the Indies. What Dutch writers and poets have written on Indonesia, from the beginning of the East Indies Company until the present) was an eye-opener and became a standard work on "Indies" literature.

In his *Spiegel* Nieuwenhuys proves to be one of the first literary historians to apply his own, broader interpretation to the concept of "literature" by not restricting himself to the traditional literary genres, such as the novel, drama, and poetry, but also including non-fictional, "non-serious" but well-written (according to Nieuwenhuys's own aesthetic standards) personal documents like travel accounts, letters, diaries, and even scientific work. Placed within a social and historical framework, these texts proved to contain important information as a "mirror" of the Dutch colonial society and mentality at the time.

Both elaborating on and reacting against Nieuwenhuys's work, in the eighties and nineties the stream of articles on Dutch-Indies literature in Holland has been growing steadily (bringing to the surface more unknown works and authors), and troublesome theoretical discussions on the correct systematic approach to texts in a history on (colonial) literature have been held. In addition essential questions concerning the corpus and the definition of its limits have been raised.¹ Articles, discussions, and questions made it clear that Nieuwenhuys's *Spiegel*—useful and valuable as his book may have been as a initial impetus to the study of colonial literature—does not meet the newly formulated demands. Twenty-five years after its first publication, there seems to be a consensus amongst experts that the task of the literary historian has increased considerably. Not only authors and texts (literary and marginal, well-written and badly written), but also "the entire communication situation in which literature is produced and received"²—including institutions, academies, printers, publishing houses, libraries, etc.—now need to be subjected to serious research. This tremendous broadening of the object of research, and the theoretical and practical problems it involves, makes the composing of such a literary history, written in a systematic way, something *dat zou moeten kunnen en toch echt niet kan* ("that should be possible, and yet seriously cannot be done").³ A new guide to

¹ An important role, also serving as platform of ideas, is played here by the Leiden/Amsterdam journal *Indische Letteren* (first volume published in 1986) with Rob Nieuwenhuys (born 1908) as one of its first editors.

² W. van den Berg, "Literatuurgeschiedenis en cultuurgeschiedenis," *Spektator. Tijdschrift voor Neerlandistiek* 16 (1986/1987): 29-40.

³ H. van Gorp, "De utopie van een omvattende literatuurgeschiedschrijving. Of hoe het zou moeten kunnen en toch echt niet kan . . ." *Spiegel der letteren* 27 (1985): 245. See for an Anglo-Saxon point of view e.g. David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Dutch colonial literature, so it seems, cannot be the work of a single author any longer, but has become a time-consuming project, to be carried out at least by several specialists working together.

Bearing all this in mind, the promising title of Beekman's recent guide *Troubled Pleasures; Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950*, and its total of 654 pages, cannot but make one curious about how the Professor of Germanic Languages at the University of Massachusetts would tackle the problems of the "new style" literary historian. However, Beekman makes it clear right from the start (pp. 5-9) that his intention is *not* to write a *history* of Dutch colonial literature, because "a parade of chronological facts pertaining to a subject that is not readily known only demonstrates a grasp of scholarly logistics" and "it would bury the reader under a superfluity of names and titles of which some do not yet require serious attention." (p. 5) According to Beekman, one should initially restrict oneself to examining the superior works of literature if a particular body of work is as yet largely unexplored, as is, he states, the case with Dutch colonial literature, particularly in terms of an English-speaking audience (it is "the aesthetic dimension of colonialism that is discussed in the present work, not ideology or politics."⁴ Furthermore, Beekman's intention is to show that the texts under discussion, written by European colonialists in the former Dutch East Indies between 1600 and 1950 "are part of a wider literary spectrum" and that these texts "need not languish as exhibits for an ideological debate." Finally, *Troubled Pleasures* hopes to "intimate a general structure and development for Dutch colonial literature, one that might be applied to other colonial literatures as well." (p. 6)

Prof. Beekman is a well-known and leading figure in the field of Dutch colonial literature. As general editor of the "Library of the Indies" (translations of "superior works" of Dutch colonial literature, including Louis Couperus's *The Hidden Force*, A. Alberts's *The Islands*, and M. Dermoût's *The Ten Thousand Things*) he contributed erudite and highly praised introductory essays and afterwords to the twelve volumes published between 1981 and 1988 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press). Revised and expanded, these texts form the basis for the present book, supplemented with new studies.

In *Troubled Pleasures*, containing twenty chapters, Beekman's literary premises, as stated above, are followed by a short general historical introduction and a sketch of the Dutch contribution to maritime history and the process of colonization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all written for an English-speaking audience *outside* the "Netherlandic frame of reference." In Chapter 4, entitled *The First Voyage to the East Indies (1595-1597) and the Beginnings of Colonial Literature*, the origin of colonial literature is discussed. Beekman states that Dutch colonial literature originated stylistically from the Dutch mariners' diaries and the travel accounts of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch explorers: "It is a style guileless, pungent, demotic, direct. It is a style creaturely realistic, flavourful, and earthy [. . .]. It is [. . .] the style of colonial literature." (p. 66) The explorer of those early centuries, the non-conformistic adventurer at sea with his individualism, independence, and inventiveness, was later to be judged a "misfit," because adventure had by that time

⁴ Beekman devotes one chapter of his study to Rob Nieuwenhuys (pp. 537-561), who supported and inspired him over the years (Beekman, *Fugitive Dreams*, p. 323). His affinity with this "creative writer and creative historian" stems undoubtedly also from the same unconditional choice for the aesthetic judgement as the main criterion for including and excluding works in a study on Dutch colonial literature.

become domesticated, and was even declared a criminal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His only refuge was the alien wilderness of the mind. And so “the captains became writers, external action had to seek satisfaction in inward mutability” (p. 69): the mariner’s journal eventually became prose fiction. Later still, after Holland had ceased to be a colonial power, the archipelago, stripped of political and historical burdens, became—as the final literary transformation of colonial literature—a construct of the imagination. In the post-war novels the Indies is celebrated as a Holland’s Atlantis, a submerged paradise, commemorating the passing of an era, a world, a way of life. (pp. 584, 599-600) This progression from a political actuality to an imaginative introversion is the general structure Beekman intimates throughout his study for the development of Dutch colonial literature.

In the following chapters, sixteen colonial authors⁵ are discussed and their texts analyzed, often by the method of close reading, supplemented with biographical and historical information and often embedded within an international and comparative framework. This last aspect makes *Troubled Pleasures* particularly interesting and important for the readers *inside* the Netherlandic frame of reference; Beekman notices remarkable parallels between Dutch-Indies society and literature on the one hand, and the society and fiction from the “Old American South” on the other. Both “share some of the most important themes of modern literature: doubt, dissatisfaction, alienation [“characteristic Romantic sensibility,” p. 70], memory and time [. . .]. Dutch colonial literature shares other aspects of American literature, not the least of which are its predominant Romanticism and its devotion to nature.” (p. 8) Within this comparative framework the famous seventeenth-century naturalist Rumphius, for example, who went to the Indies as an employee in service of the Dutch East Indies Company and who in a literary style described the “curiosities” of tropical nature in several volumes, is compared with Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch contemporary botanists and called “a tropical Thoreau whose spirit was tempered with an Emersonian forbearance.” “His Concord was the small island of Ambon in the Moluccas and he described its natural denizens with as much care as the American the pleasures of rural Massachusetts.” (p. 81) Similarly, the nature writing of the nineteenth-century naturalist Junghuhn, whose travel accounts and extensive work on Java’s volcanoes became famous for their scientific as well as their literary merits, is compared with Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, with John Muir’s *The Mountains of California*, and (again) with Junghuhn’s American contemporary and confrère, Thoreau, with whom, among others, he shared the Romantic style, the intense experience of nature, and the “wildness within himself.” (pp. 184-195) Throughout his study, Beekman describes these and other relationships between Dutch colonial literature and other (American) literatures in a very convincing way, showing that the texts are indeed part of a wider literary spectrum, thereby providing Dutch colonial literature with an important international setting it hitherto lacked.

⁵ These authors are: Rumphius (seventeenth century); F. Valentijn (eighteenth century); F. W. Junghuhn, E. Douwes Dekker (Multatuli), Louis Couperus, Alexander Cohen, P. A. Daum, and Kartini (nineteenth century); E. du Perron, Beb Vuyk, Maria Dermoût, H. J. Friedericy, Vincent Mahieu, Rob Nieuwenhuys, Willem Walraven, and A. Alberts (twentieth century).

Since most of Dutch colonial literature is narrative prose, Beekman finds a useful model for analyzing that literature in the Russian philosopher Bakhtin's theory of the modern novel. In 1860 Multatuli (ps. Eduard Douwes Dekker) wrote his famous novel *Max Havelaar*, the Dutch equivalent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a strong plea in favor of the Javanese in the Indies who were, according to Multatuli, exploited and mistreated under Dutch imperial rule. In Beekman's chapter on this nineteenth-century writer and "most unusual Dutchman," *Max Havelaar* is described as Dutch literature's first modern novel and "a perfect illustration of Bakhtin's contention that the novel is a dialogic or polyphonic prose discourse, which has come to dominate twentieth-century literature." With Bakhtin's explorations of the "dialogic" or "polyphonic" novel, Beekman states, we get a better understanding of the importance of Dekker's novel because it not only advanced colonial literature from the monologic, pre-novelistic texts (e.g. the mariner's journals) to the complex phenomenon of the modern novel, but it also advanced Dutch literature "from the moribund orthodoxy of the nineteenth century to the 'expressive capacities' of the modern prose text" with its many voices, languages and discourses. (p. 229) Beekman's conviction that literature is not fashioned by politics also becomes clear in this chapter. Determining the greatness of a work throughout time and beyond referential restrictions is the liberating task of literary scholarship, he writes, and he therefore focuses on the literary brilliance of Dekker's novel, rather than on non-literary references such as its "truth-quotient" (the political verities, widely discussed in Dutch literature on Multatuli) or, for example, any political function of the novel in the colonial society, since those matters are "irremediably bound to its epoch and that epoch is history." (p. 234) Concerning this last aspect, it is worth shifting our outlook for a moment to a non-Western point of view. In the archipelago, from around 1900 onwards, *Max Havelaar* became popular among a small but important group of western-educated Indonesians who found the novel on their compulsory reading lists. For these "pioneer nationalists" the significance of the novel was seen in its content, not in its (literary) form. Particularly the subplot of *Saidjah and Adinda*, the dramatic story in which the love between two young Indonesians was cruelly destroyed as a result of Dutch violence, as well as a few other fragments from the novel, were regularly quoted in political speeches and discussions. In a period in which Indonesian nationalistic feelings became stronger and stronger, Indonesians could draw inspiration from a Dutch novel. For them Multatuli was first and foremost *een politieke strijder met de pen* ("a political fighter with the pen")⁶ and his novel was important because of the strong feelings of disgust the book might arouse where Dutch colonial oppression was concerned. A direct link can be made from the colonial days to the 1990s. For the critical present-day Indonesian the parallel with that past is evident. The colonial injustices portrayed in *Max Havelaar* (translated into Indonesian in 1972) are now, however, compared to the ways in which the Indonesian government deals with opponents and the poor in Indonesian society. Multatuli, mainly through his *Saidjah and Adinda*, lives on in Indonesian society as a symbol of humanity and social awareness.⁷

The narrative of *Saidjah and Adinda* is no doubt a superior text from an aesthetic point of view. A badly written, "non-superior" text would have had little appeal to

⁶ Amir, "Multatuli (1820-1887)," *Jong Sumatra* 3, 2/3 (1920): 35-7.

⁷ See L. Dolk, *Twee Zielen, Twee Gedachten. Tijdschriften en intellectuelen op Java (1900-1957)* (Leiden: KITLV, 1993), pp. 23-67.

Indonesians. Restricting oneself however to a literary analysis of *Max Havelaar*, legitimate as this approach might be, and thus leaving out (in this example) its political and social influence on colonial society, limits, in my opinion, the scope of the analysis excessively. In his final volume of the Library of the Indies, *Fugitive Dreams*, Beekman himself states that colonial literature is a literature that "can still instruct, because it delineates the historical and psychological confrontation of East and West, it depicts the uneasy alliance of these antithetical forces, and it shows by prior example the demise of Western imperialism."⁸ Van Zonneveld, citing Beekman's words in an article on the problems of defining colonial literature, argues that this historical and psychological confrontation of East and West might well be considered the common thread, even the backbone, running through both colonial and post-colonial literatures.⁹ Political and ideological issues are obviously not Beekman's cup of tea, but inevitably they constitute an important aspect of a context in which power relations dominate. Revealing these power relations, showing how a colonial text can act as a "mirror" reflecting for example the colonialist's self-image, does not have to make a work irrevocably "languish as exhibit for an ideological debate." Particularly within a comparative analysis, these aspects seem to me just as important as the aesthetic dimension of a text.

The voice of the East, the "Other" in *Troubled Pleasures*, is represented by Kartini (1879-1904), the daughter of the Javanese regent of Djapara. As a girl, Kartini attended a Dutch primary school on Java and thereby learned to read and write Dutch and, as a consequence, was able to absorb Western ideas on emancipation and personal liberty. Her position as the daughter of a Javanese aristocrat permitted her only very rarely to leave the large family compound after the age of twelve (until her marriage in 1903), but her father did permit her to correspond freely with her Dutch friends, including the director of the Colonial Department of Education, J. H. Abendanon, and his wife, with whom Kartini shared a strong belief in women's education and women's rights. In 1911, seven years after her death, Abendanon collected the often poignant and courageous letters Kartini had written as weapons in her struggle for individual liberty from her "gilded cage" in Djapara. Beekman regards both Kartini and her letters as the most illustrative embodiment of the central paradox of colonialism: through her personality and work, changes for the better eventually took place within the indigenous society in terms of schooling for girls, but the impetus for these changes had to come, paradoxically, from Western sources.

Interesting and important as her letters and "voice" may be, I find Beekman's decision to include Kartini in his collection inconsistent, given his own aesthetic argument. Kartini's letters are generally not considered as "superior texts" in this respect. Beekman seems to agree with that. He characterizes her style as "influenced by a form of writing that today is considered sentimental and effusive" using a great deal of exclamations, italicized emphasis and romantic rhetoric. (p. 401) More than the literary merits of her letters, Beekman admires here, and rightly so, Kartini's personality, her superior intellect and feeling, the fact that she voiced her opposition

⁸ E. M. Beekman, ed., *Fugitive Dreams. An Anthology of Dutch Colonial Literature* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. xiv.

⁹ Peter van Zonneveld, "Indisch-Nederlandse literatuur: problemen en taken," in *Herinnering, Herkomst, Herschrijving. Koloniale en Postkoloniale Literaturen*, ed. Theo D'haen (Leiden: Vakgroep Talen en Culturen van Zuidoost-Azië en Oceanië, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1990).

and proposed a solution. Eventually, it was also her personality and everything she stood for that made her “transcendental” and transformed her into the Heroine of National Freedom she represents today in Indonesia.

Moreover, we meet here with the problem of the terminology, the corpus of texts and its limits, involving questions such as “what exactly is colonial literature,” “when does it begin,” “when does it come to an end,” “what do we understand by ‘Indies,’” etc. Beekman seems unconcerned with these questions, but one can’t help asking them while studying his book. Clearly, Kartini’s letters are not part of the corpus of texts “written by European colonialists in the former Dutch East Indies” as Beekman states in his *Literary Premises*. Should we nevertheless include them in a book on Dutch colonial literature? The same sort of questions arise in relation to authors, examined in *Troubled Pleasures*, from the twentieth century, like Maria Dermoût and A. Alberts. Dermoût and Alberts lived in the Indies but only started to write about it as “former” European colonialists back in Holland in the 1950s, after Indonesia’s independence. We generally regard, as does Beekman, both books as belonging to “colonial literature,” even though they were not written during the colonial period, simply because their writers lived in the Dutch Indies or because they deal with colonial life. In his conclusion Beekman mentions the Dutch writer Jeroen Brouwers, who was born in 1940 in Java, and who “repatriated” to Holland in 1948. “Brouwers can hardly be considered a colonial writer” (p. 599), but some of his modernist texts do have remembrances of “the Indies,” as a submerged paradise, as their subject: “the tropical engram stayed in his mind and stirred his imagination into fashioning a context for understanding what he had lost.” Not a colonial writer, but—referring to Dermoût and Alberts—nevertheless a colonial text? What, exactly, should we understand by the subtitle of Beekman’s study: *Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950*? In his *Fugitive Dreams* (an anthology of the work of eight “colonial” writers from 1600 up to 1942) Beekman defines “colonial” texts as “the works of authors whose lives span the length of the Dutch colonial presence in Indonesia.”¹⁰ From the sixteenth century onwards, the explorers and seafarers of the East India Company had established trading posts in the archipelago, but Holland only became a full colonial power around 1800. Of course Beekman is aware of these questions concerning terminology and corpus, also the subject of lengthy debates in English-language literature, but considers them probably more essential in a literary history, which he did not intend to write. Anyone involved with Dutch colonial literature or writing a book about it, however, has to reflect on these questions, it seems to me. Maybe “colonial” literature is the wrong terminology altogether, and we should prefer *Indies literature* here instead (as we do in Dutch) defining it as “the collective term for those works which are part of the Dutch-language literature and in which in some way or other the Indies are touched upon,”¹¹ thereby automatically including post-colonial works like that of Jeroen Brouwers.

¹⁰ Beekman, *Fugitive Dreams*, p. xv.

¹¹ H. M. J. Maier, “‘Indische Literatuur’. Bezinningen op een definitie,” in *Weerwerk. Schrijven en Terugschrijven in Koloniale en Postkoloniale Literaturen*, red. Theo D’haen (Leiden: Vakgroep Talen en Culturen van Zuidoost-Azië en Oceanië, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1996), p. 29.

Don't let my formalistic objections to his basic principles and my nit-picking about terminology, however, in any way trouble your pleasures of enjoying Beekman's highly readable and important study with its abundance of original and challenging thoughts and its cosmopolitan outlook. Ironically—leaving aside for a moment Beekman's choice for aesthetic brilliance—his guide to "Indies" literature in its structure comes pretty close to present-day understandings of what a literary history should look like: not a "parade of chronological facts," not "a superfluity of names and titles," but a more "exemplary," essayistic approach.

Finally, we in the Netherlands should be grateful that through Beekman's hard work over the years, part of our literature has been made accessible to an English-speaking audience. I can't think of any other scholar in the field who would have been able to do this, and in such an excellent way.