
ESCAPE FROM THE GREEN AND GLOSS OF JAVA: HELLA S. HAASSE AND INDIES LITERATURE

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Of course *Oeroeg*, first published anonymously in 1948, is a Dutch novel of growing up, of *Bildung*. The tale's main protagonist, a nameless and faceless narrator, grows up in the mysterious and glossy nature of the Indies, only slightly supervised by his distant and cool parents on a plantation in West Java. He passes, rather unharmed, through his early youth, cultivating an intimate friendship with Oeroeg, a boy of the same age. However, gradually their friendship starts to disintegrate, the result of political and cultural conflicts that force the boys to take a stand in the Indies' heterogeneous and multi-layered society. The narrator eventually goes to Holland to study, and returns to the land of his birth after the Second World War as a soldier in the Dutch Indies army, ready to get married, to have children and to kill—and perhaps even to die on his native soil, the place where he feels he belongs. In a final meeting with Oeroeg, he is told that he should leave the land—and this shocking experience serves as the starting point for the tale, which is largely told in retrospect.

Oeroeg,¹ in other words, is written on the model of so many other tales, long and short, in European languages: a hero grows into maturity within the context of his society. As a *Bildungsroman*, *Oeroeg* could easily remind its readers of Dutch novels, such as, for instance, F. Bordewijk's *Karakter* (Character, 1936) and S. Vestdijk's *Terug naar Ina Damman* (Back to Ina Damman, 1935), in which a young man comes of age in the Netherlands after overcoming some serious problems with relatives and friends. However, the tale could also be read against the background of Malay novels such as

¹ Anonymous, *Oeroeg* (Amsterdam: De Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels, 1948). Later editions were published by Querido, Amsterdam. An English translation can be found in *Forever a Stranger and Other Stories*, trans. Margaret M. Alibasah (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Takdir Alisjahbana's *Lajar Terkembang* (With full sails, 1936) and Abdoel Moeis's *Salah Asoehan* (Wrong upbringing, 1928), in which the relationship between the main protagonists, growing up in the colonial world, dissolves in conflict and death as often as it ends in a happy marriage, that utopian metaphor of social order and harmony. *Oeroeg* ends in dissolution: the narrator and his friend Oeroeg are bound to be partners for life—until they are torn apart by societal forces and go their own way after a final confrontation. The relationship is broken off, the result of the mobility and interiority that have taken hold of both of them.²

The fact that the tale is narrated in the first-person singular could make *Oeroeg* an imperfect *Bildungsroman*. Its retrospective character—the narrative moves backwards rather than forwards—should make it even harder to appreciate the probability of the events that are represented. Its formal features—the shifts in tense, the interplays between past and present, the tensions between memories of experiences and elements of present-day reality—should make us doubt *Oeroeg's* realism, in other words. Given the place and time of its publication, Amsterdam 1948, two other features of this tale of formation and dissolution may be even more unusual: the partnership is between two boys rather than between a boy and a girl, and, secondly, the relationship evolves not somewhere in Europe, an area where life has for long been overshadowed by colonial adventures, but in one of the colonies. On the island of Java, to be more precise. On the central island of *Indië*, the Indies. *Oeroeg* has been categorized as a colonial novel. As an Indies novel.

These days, *Indië* is a term that, for people in the Netherlands, primarily refers to a land not too far away from never-never land. It has been used to evoke the vaguely demarcated group of islands around the equator, around Singapore and the Malay Peninsula, or to refer to the islands beyond the South Chinese Sea and the Indian Ocean or, from a reverse perspective, beyond the continent of Australia. "The Indies" tends to evoke not only a more or less distinct space (in which the water is at least as important as the land), but also a certain period of time, the years between 1900 and 1949. This temporal demarcation should make us realize that not only people but also islands, pins of apparent permanence, are located in time and have a history of their own; they, too, can have a *Bildung* that leads to dissolutions, to transformations and new classifications—and often such shifts are reflected by a change of name. First *Oost Indië*, then *Nederlandsch Indië*, then *Indië*, then *Indonesia*. First the East Indies, then the Dutch Indies, then the Indies, then Indonesia. *Indië*, in short, is a historically contextualized term. And *Oeroeg*, located and set in the Indies, is a historically loaded tale. It is a tale of and about the Indies.

Indië refers to a group of islands in a certain period of time. It also serves as a central point of reference in a vaguely defined corpus of texts that, in an ever changing discursive configuration, has lost a great number of words and sentences over the course of time and yet keeps expanding up to the present day, though at an increasingly confusing and decelerating pace. This configuration of texts about the Indies consists of scholarly work, reports, statistics, archives, and periodicals, as well as artful tales. Each of these texts addresses a number of questions and issues that have

² See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 4-5.

made the term of *Indië*, the conversations about “the Indies,” move ahead. From being a name that summarized ever more novel experiences and information concerning a group of islands, *Indië* has slowly become a word that generates recollections and memories; it is losing contact with historical reality and is coming gradually to be doomed to float anchorless in the sea of words. *Oeroeg*, published in 1948, appeared at a turning point in this process: from that time, the Indies would no longer be a place of experience or a moment of shock, but a set of memories and reminiscences. Concurrently, it seems *Indië* has lost its distinct prominence in Dutch conversations, only to return with a vengeance: as a world of words, it still shadows every novel conversation. *Indië* seems to live in the Netherlands alone.

Indies is not only a never-never land. It has also been presented as a colony, as an area where the indigenous population became directly and forcibly involved in a system of labor, money, and exchange. Steered by the dynamics of capitalism, this system was supervised by a self-appointed group of outsiders who came to be insiders of sorts once they had lived in the land long enough, begat progeny, and exercised a certain amount of authority by way of a more or less effective administration, a configuration of laws and regulations, a set of rituals, and an armed force. Like every system, this colonial system, too, was bound to create anxieties; these anxieties emerged among the population and led, among other movements, to Indonesian nationalism, a set of terms and notions that, expressed in more or less artful writings and speeches in various languages, formed the basis for the concerted efforts mounted by certain groups that had gravitated around self-appointed insiders. These efforts were intended to oust the so-called foreign masters and their local accomplices.

The term “colony” suggests the existence of an area of land and sea that is pervaded by a heterogeneous set of tensions and interactions between rulers and ruled. The rulers are perceived as foreigners by the ruled, who impose that distinction upon the colonial society, which is more or less held together by an administration, as much as the rulers themselves do, albeit the latter, in defense of their ruling positions, prefer to call themselves parents, teachers, and engineers rather than inhabitants, locals, or citizens. Sooner or later these tensions and interactions lead to conflicts that remove the foreign rulers from their positions of authority. Thus the rulers constitute a group of people whose identity is seen as ambiguous and hence unsettling, as they are at once linked with their motherland and their land of belonging.

Dutch colonial literature could be described as the configuration of artful writings in which reference is made to these conflicts and tensions, events and experiences in *Nederlandsch Indië* and *Indië*, presented from the rulers’ point of view, and written in the Dutch language. These writings deal with one and the same issue: the colonial situation, the multi-layered interactions between a pluriform variety of groups of rulers and ruled. In Dutch colonial literature, these interactions were initially—that is, around 1860—described in predominantly cultural and natural terms, while later—that is around 1930—they would be rendered in racial and political terms.

Dutch colonial literature, in short, does not attract much interest among Indonesian readers, neither in the original nor in translation;³ Indies literature is hardly ever

³ Subagio Satrowardoyo’s insightful book on the topic, *Sastra Hindia Belanda dan Kita* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1983), has not raised much of an echo either. Telling in another way is Rudy Kousbroek’s story of how the

referred to in literary and cultural discussions in Indonesia. Only a few Indonesians ever wanted to address their colonial masters; Dutch has never been their favorite language for written works; and more than once, Indonesians have indicated that they find the portraits of their imaginary ancestors in such texts to be unflattering and bland in ways that do not concur with the terms they themselves have developed about the colonial situation. For all these reasons, when in the 1970s some literary works that by Dutch experts are considered to be highlights of Indies literature were translated into Malay and published in Indonesia, they were given a very cool reception.⁴

Dutch colonial literature is a group of texts that is primarily read and discussed by Dutch readers alone. As such it should make up a part of Dutch literary life, but it does not: Indies literature is a literature on its own.⁵

1948, Amsterdam, the Turning Point

Oeroeg was first published in 1948, at a point in time, that is, when the Dutch—a term that is as confusing and contested as *belanda* and *landa*, its equivalents in the languages of *Indië*—began to realize that the rulers could not stay in or return to the islands as economic masters, cultural teachers, agricultural engineers, armed soldiers, and administrative authorities. The colonial situation, driven by racial and economic conflicts, could not be restored or repeated. After the so-called Japanese period, the Indies were almost univocally turned into Indonesia, and the role of the outsiders with their ambiguous identity—culturally as well as economically, they belonged to the Indies and to the motherland at once—was being taken over by a local elite, a “native” elite that, equally ambiguous in cultural as well as societal terms, was initially less different from their predecessors than they presented themselves to the common man. The new rulers tried to neutralize every possible glimmer of similarity and correspondence between the colonial and post-independence situations by way of a strong anti-Dutch and anti-colonial propaganda, efficient and effective enough to create an apparent break between these two eras that was not only a political and economic one, but also a cultural and linguistic one. Tales about the historical presence of the Dutch masters were artfully made a powerful allegory of the dark days of repression that, filled with blood and cruelty, had lasted for 350 years, and until the

translator of Madelon Szekely-Lulofs’s Dutch colonial novel, *Koelie* (first published in 1932), publicly claimed in 1987 that she should have “the right and the obligation to correct in her translation” the picture that the book offered of Indonesian workers as being docile, treacherous, and lazy; it did not correspond with the ideas she herself had about Indonesians as being heroic, loyal, and diligent. See Rudy Kousbroek’s intriguing collection of essays on the relationships between the Netherlands and the Indies, *Het Oostindisch Kampyndroom* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1992), pp. 98-103.

⁴ Perhaps with the exception of Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar*, of which only some fragments were discussed again and again.

⁵ A number of the best works of Dutch colonial literature have been translated in other European languages, however none of them has played a significant role in the discussions about colonial and postcolonial literature, so fashionable in academic circles and beyond these days. Moreover, in these very Dutch conversations, so-called Indies literature has remained an isolated topic, so that the overall response to these works among Dutch scholars differs radically from the way the work of authors such as Kipling, Conrad, and Achebe, Camus, Malraux, and Ben Jelhoun has been discussed as English and French literature, respectively.

present day that image has remained a crucial element in every local explanation of the rotten state of Indonesia. Concurrently, the colonial situation has, so to speak, been elevated to a higher, if not abstract, level, in which an absolute opposition is assumed to have existed between “the Dutch” and “the Indonesians”—“the Dutch” were turned away from the islands, “the Indonesians” pushed them out—and memories and writings have been adapted to reflect that opposition.

The active engagement with the so-called colonial system of many self-appointed local leaders and intellectuals, including Oeroeg, has been passed over in silence. The narrator of *Oeroeg* was told he did not belong to the Indies, to his country of birth, and he did not understand why he was not allowed to be a father, a teacher, or an engineer on his native soil. Why was he not allowed to call himself a native on the island of Java?

Initially, the name of the writer of *Oeroeg* was as unknown to the public as the name of the book’s narrator. The Association for the Promotion of the Book Trade’s Interests (*Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels*) had organized a competition in order to acquire a short novel that deserved publication in the Week of Books and could serve as a bonus present to everyone who was willing to spend a certain amount of money on books in that very Week. Out of the nineteen entries, a committee had selected *Oeroeg*, written by someone who had submitted the manuscript under the Malay pseudonym of *Soeka toelis* (Like to write). *Oeroeg* was the book that was printed and distributed, and in the second phase of the competition the *Vereeniging* invited readers to guess who, out of the list of nineteen contestants, was the tale’s real author.⁶ How many people effectively made the correct guess is not clear. What is clear is that the author’s name was soon made public: Hella S. Haasse. This author’s name was primarily connected with cabaret and theater in the capital, Amsterdam; she was establishing a family life at the time of writing her first longer piece of prose. Before long, it was to become publicly known, too, that she was born in Batavia in 1918 and had spent most of her youth in the Indies, and that she had come to the Netherlands shortly before the War in order to study at the university, like so many other young intellectuals who were born and raised in the Indies. Like the narrator of *Oeroeg*, for instance. And not much later, Haasse let it be known publicly that experiences during her youth in the Indies had shaped her worldview, her view of life, and her writing, another echo of the words of *Oeroeg*’s narrator.

Oeroeg was Hella Haasse’s first novel. Those were the days when “literature” still played a central role in the Netherlands’ bookshops and in intellectual life. In the book trade, as well as in the educational system, literary work was considered of crucial importance in commercial as well as in cultural terms. “Literature” could claim central relevance in Dutch education and beyond, as it allegedly made the people of the Netherlands a civilized nation. Those were also the days when publications and discussions about the Indies were relatively numerous. A war was raging in the colony, hiding behind the comparatively diminutive term “police action,” and *Oeroeg* must have been avidly read and discussed in the motherland, like so many other

⁶ A description can be found in F. Springer’s short essay, “Soeka toelis,” in *Wisselend décor: Hommages aan Hella S. Haasse*, ed. Nelleke Noordervliet et al. (Amsterdam: Querido, 1998), pp. 33-35.

publications about the Indies, if only in order to help readers repress and forget the dilemmas it addressed.

"I should state here that Oeroeg is branded on my life, like a seal, like a sign, more than ever so on this very moment when every possible contact, every being together has become history for good. I do not exactly know why I want to account for my relationship with Oeroeg, of what Oeroeg meant for me—and what he still means. Perhaps it is his irrevocable, incomprehensible being-different, that secret of soul and blood, which for child and adolescent did not create problems, but now seems ever more tormenting."⁷

Reception

At the time the book was first published, not everyone appreciated *Oeroeg* as much as did the members of the committee who had selected it to be distributed as a gift to avid readers and excellent customers. In particular the final scene—and the final paragraphs of a tale tend to generate the most powerful force in every reading—may have been cathartic to some, yet it was certainly disturbing to others. The pair we had expected to be friends for life separate after a short exchange of words and gestures. Whereas Oeroeg, a guerrilla fighter, disappears in the forest, the narrator, now a soldier committed to defend Dutch interests, rejoins his platoon and closes his tale in a reflective mood:

I have done nothing but write a report of a youth, experienced together. I wanted to establish the picture of those years; they passed without leaving a trace. As if they were nothing but smoke in the wind. Kebon Djatih is a memory, and so are the Boarding School and Lida; Abdullah and I pass each other in silence, and Oeroeg I will never meet again. Perhaps it is not necessary to admit that I did not understand him. I knew him like I knew the lake, Telaga Hideung—a reflecting surface. The depth I never fathomed. Is it too late? Have I become a stranger for good in my country of birth, on the earth from which I do not wish to be transplanted? Time will tell.⁸

No doubt, there have been many readers who, confronted with those sentences, have thought that *Oeroeg* was more than a tale of the friendship between two individuals. The tale was strong enough to be interpreted as an allegory of the failed relationship between the Netherlands and the Indies, or Indonesia, for that matter—and many Dutch readers will still agree with that conclusion: *Indië* is a faraway country and they did things differently there. When the book was originally published, however, not everyone found that message pleasing. Were the Indies not part of the Netherlands, and did the Dutch not still have great tasks to perform, heavy responsibilities to carry, in that land? Some of these discontented readers, more experienced with life in the Indies, would claim that the author gave a completely inaccurate picture of the life of children and adolescents in *Indië*, and that there was no reason to accept *Oeroeg's* suggestion that "Indonesians" and "Dutch" were bound to fight a bitter war on the basis of racial, political, or economic differences. Why evoke such a dramatic

⁷ Anonymous, *Oeroeg*, p. 9. Translations are mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79

separation that satisfied nobody? Before long, this disapproval was given a personal note, in a turn characteristic of literary life in the Netherlands, which has always been more focused on the personal lives of authors than on their work. What could this white author, who had lived outside of the world of natives and even outside of the world of Indo-Europeans, know about life in the Indies as it was really lived? She had grown up as a Dutch girl in a Dutch environment, and the way she wrote about daily life in *Indië* amply demonstrated that she was completely unfamiliar with the actual lives of the people living over there, whom *Oeroeg* and her other characters were supposed to represent.⁹

Oeroeg is a short book, and it is an easy read. The tale is organized around a simple story line, occasionally interrupted by some philosophical reflections, and it is located in the Indies. Perhaps for this reason taste makers in Amsterdam and The Hague were unwilling to give it the praise they showered on the novels by authors such as W. F. Hermans, G. K. van het Reve, and Anna Blaman, who, driven by a dark and cynical vision of life, were evoking a world that was more recognizable and hence seemed more characteristic (and exciting) for the readers immersed in Dutch literature and the Netherlands after the war. Not appreciated as innovative and dark, *Oeroeg* was immediately categorized as a typical example of Indies literature: a series of nostalgic reminiscences of intense experiences in *Indië*. This interpretation confirmed what most people in the Netherlands wanted to believe: “we” should not care too much anymore about the Indies, which is lost and gone. Novels about postwar life in the Netherlands sentenced *Oeroeg*—and tales about the Indies in general—to a marginal position in literary conversations, and this marginalization is reflected in the literary histories and textbooks that were to appear in later years. Literary work about the colonial situation was ignored or ridiculed. Indies became a never-never land, to be remembered by way of some dark pages only—and for many, *Oeroeg* was such a dark page, not worthy of a serious discussion.

Innovative or not, largely ignored by critics and scholars or not, *Oeroeg* was to remain a relevant book for several generations of Dutch readers, many of whom had

⁹ A summary of these arguments can be found in *De Oost-Indische Spiegel* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1972), by Rob Nieuwenhuys, who could not refrain from making some derogatory remarks about Haasse’s later work on the Indies as well. According to Nieuwenhuys, Haasse was a *totok*, a full-blood Dutch woman, and as such she did not understand anything of the “real” life in the Indies. Living in a self-created diaspora, Nieuwenhuys may have assumed too easily that all so-called Indies authors who were still alive in the 1970s should share his stance of longing-for-without-belonging-to *Indië* and, hence, indulge in nostalgia. His judgment must have hurt Haasse; she had lived in the Indies, too, and her critics seemed to deny her the right to describe her experiences in the Indies, the right to have lived, let alone to have been born, there. Some thirty years later she was to take literary revenge. In her novel *Sleuteloog* (2002), she creates the figure of Eugene Mijers who, venomously modeled on Nieuwenhuys, has made himself the spokesman of the people who had left the Indies for the Netherlands: “What struck me most is the way Eugene has identified himself with the milieu to which he did not really belong. In his looks, his way of speaking, he was the paragon of a purebred Dutch boy with a tropical complexion and the slight Indies accent everybody who grew up in the Indies has. But nobody would ever take him for a white Eurasian, the air he was to take up later in interviews. In that pose, he established his reputation in postwar Holland as the referee for everything that could be called *Indië*.” He “created his own genealogy with an Indonesian grandmother and an apocryphal youth on Java, strongly influenced by an Indies atmosphere and customs. I heard him give an emotional talk about a sweet and dedicated *baboe* [domestic servant] who had carried him around in her *slendang* [sling] and had nurtured him with her Javanese wisdom,” *Sleuteloog* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2002), pp. 103-108.

something to do with the colony in one way or another, and who wanted to be able to accept the fact that the Indies had become Indonesia and then go on with their lives in the Netherlands. In its apparent simplicity, the novel summarized the colonial situation, referred to a problematic present, and offered an easy conclusion: let us forget about the Indies. The blessings of redundancy, so to speak. Since its first publication, some 300,000 copies have been printed and sold; in the early nineties, it served as the basis of a movie with the same name that enjoyed relative popularity and reconfirmed public knowledge of the tale. Around the turn of the century, it was still available in every “good bookshop” and in every second-hand bookshop, for that matter, and it has remained one of the most popular books for secondary school students, who must read and analyze a number of Dutch novels for their final exams and may chose *Oeroeg* not only because it is just over a hundred pages long.

Altogether, it is safe to assume that *Oeroeg* has had a strongly formative influence on Dutch intellectuals, young and old. Indifference and ignorance—and their counter forces, nostalgia and knowledge—about the colony that was lost have been inspired or strengthened by short and simple novels such as *Oeroeg*. Dutch and Indonesians are different, “we” will never understand “them,” and perhaps we should just evade this painful issue, push the colonial situation aside, and turn the Indies into a wonderland. That may have been the salient logic behind *Oeroeg*’s reception from the start.

The Allegorical Force of *Oeroeg*

A nameless Dutch boy, the shy son of a hard-working and colorless administrator and his neurotic wife, grows up in West Java, together with *Oeroeg*,¹⁰ his Sundanese friend, the son of one of his father’s servants. The narrator and *Oeroeg* share their lives on a day-to-day basis until they are sent to different schools, both paid for by the narrator’s father, who does not want to see his son behave like a “native” and feels he has to pay a moral debt to *Oeroeg*’s family, as *Oeroeg*’s father died in a nocturnal effort to save his master’s son in the Black Lake, Telaga Hiteung. The boys’ different schooling is the beginning of the process of separation. The narrator spends the final years of his adolescence in Batavia, while his friend moves to Soerabaja. When they meet again, not long before the narrator leaves for Holland, he finds *Oeroeg*—politically active, an eloquent speaker, an angry young man, educated, uncooperative with the Indies administration—very hostile towards him (“I do not need your help”), an attitude that will continue to confuse him to the end; the narrator presents himself as a naive and alienated youngster with little sensitivity for the colonial situation. He goes to Holland to study and comes back to his land of birth as a soldier after the Second World War, as a tool in Dutch efforts to restore the colonial

¹⁰ In 1995 Haasse told an interviewer that she discovered only much later that *oeroeg* is a Sundanese word, meaning “landslide.” “I discovered that only in 1992. I must have known or heard that word when I was a girl, and apparently it stuck in my memory, loose from every possible meaning. When I started the novelette in the summer of 1947, only one thing was certain. The first sentence was to be ‘*Oeroeg* was my friend.’ A landslide is figuratively speaking a great change. Enigmatic, is it not? What took place in the second part of the 1940s was of course a fundamental change in the existing relations. For everyone: Indonesians, Indo-Europeans, Dutch—directly involved or not with the decolonization. And it was an *oeroeg* for me personally.” Quoted from Remco Meijer, *Oostindisch Doof: Het Nederlandse Debat over de Dekolonisatie van Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1995), p. 21.

situation and regain authority. When he eventually meets Oeroeg close to the Black Lake, he is told that he should leave the country because it is not his.

It is almost self-evident that one can read *Oeroeg* in terms of an allegory of the colonial situation, of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the Indies: the protagonist, the Dutch narrator of the tale, grows up as a representative of the ruling class with all the privileges that come with that position, be it largely unknowingly so; he is not aware of the economic and racial implications or causes of the colonial situation until the very end of the tale, and until that moment he hardly even registers that his closest friend, born around the same date on the same location, is slowly but really growing away from him. Eventually he is forced to realize that they have nothing in common anymore, and, in a radical shortcut to closure, he concludes that they never had anything in common. The relationship between the narrator and Oeroeg unfolds like the relationship between rulers and ruled in an Indies' nutshell—or should we say, in a slightly anachronistic manner, between Dutch and natives, or between white and brown?

So strong is the trauma of this divorce, this misunderstanding, for the narrator that even in retrospect he is unable to come up with an explicit and clear explanation of the separation. He does not know how to account for the divorce in either psychological or economic or political terms, and the final sentences, already quoted, read more like an expression of disillusion and surprise than of anger and insight. The fact that the young man had a strange upbringing—his mother is pictured as a depressed woman who leaves care of her son to others and later departs for Europe with her apparent lover, while his father is a true colonial, a hard-working and insensitive administrator with little time for his family—could be read as an explanation for his lack of wisdom, an awkward term that suggests a delicate balance between emotion and knowledge. However, it may be more tempting to search for an interpretation in historical terms: Dutch people in the Indies were as uprooted, ambivalent, and transplanted as the local people whom they allegedly tried to teach their knowledge and science, and in this ambivalence, conflicts developed in which they were bound to lose their ground.

Oeroeg reads, in short, like the superb tale of late-colonial life in that it pictures the relationship between Dutch and natives in a very confused way—or perhaps we should say, echoing George Orwell's remarks about Forster, in a way marked by humanistic blindness to the economic logic so fundamental to the colonial situation. The narrator is embedded within the colonial system, and he does not feel the need of getting out of it, let alone of subverting it; the dynamics of this invisible system, however, force him to make Oeroeg a native (*inlander*, the word is rarely used in the book) as much as Oeroeg makes him a European,¹¹ a *landa* (a word that is equally rare). The narrator does not fathom the implications of this mutual awareness. The question, "What went wrong?" goes unanswered, and so does the question, "Why did it go wrong?" There is only the registration "*that it went wrong.*" We are left with a report of a failed relationship in individual terms rather than in economic or political terms, and it is up to the readers to make sense of that report and turn it into an allegory of sorts. Nostalgia is lacking in the narrator's tale; his memories are inspired by a sense of

¹¹It is worth noticing that the narrator refers to himself as a "European" rather than as a "Dutchman," two terms that deserve a separate exploration within the framework of the colonial situation.

loss and displacement rather than by a sense of longing for lost beauty and warmth that could be regained by way of the imagination. The eventual focus is on thoughts about the future—"time will tell"—rather than on recollections of things past. The divorce seems definite.

Oeroeg describes a process of mutual othering in which notions of race remain as uneasily hidden as the relations concerning power and class; even a careful analysis would find it hard to prove that the narrator is explicitly speaking and reporting from a position of white superiority and authority. But then, was the nameless and faceless narrator really unaware of the essence of the colonial situation, or is his tale a tale of feigned ignorance?

In the gaze of the narrator, *Oeroeg* eventually becomes as dark as Telaga Hiteung, the lake that several times in the narrative is pictured as the ultimate source of horror. It is the place where *Oeroeg*'s father meets his end when he tries to save the narrator, his master's son. It is the place of ghosts, the place of spirits and *jinn*s that fill the boys with attraction and repulsion at once. Not to be understood. *Oeroeg* repeats that horror and, therefore, he is bound to stay in his friend's memory, even after the dissolution of their relationship. *Oeroeg* is a black lake that torments the narrator and forces him to write a clueless report in order to fill up the experiences of his formative years. As a place of horror, *Indië* forces Dutch listeners and readers to keep the native in their collective memory as the distant and different "other" who cannot be fathomed and was never understood, and this *Indië* remains in their thoughts and words, in displaced images.

Perhaps the allegorical power of a tale can only be explored and appreciated in certain times, in certain places. Such explorations are acts of reading in history, then and now giving a tale its fulfillment in reality in ways it did not necessarily have at the time of creation and publication. The words and sentences are made to point to situations beyond the words, hinting at something that, for some time, will be held for an ultimate reality in itself without ever being touched.

The Ruled, the Native

Representing feelings of guilt, trauma, desire, and threat, as well as evoking them, *Oeroeg* is one of the few Dutch tales in which a native plays a prominent and decisive role. That could be called yet another unusual feature of this *Bildungsroman*.

But then, what is a native? It would be too easy to state that the word simply refers to those who are born on local soil, or to those who are born on a certain place: those are descriptions that sound like the empty but necessary platitudes that make up a dictionary. "Have I become a stranger in the country of my birth for good, on the earth from which I do not wish to be transplanted?" is the final question of *Oeroeg*'s narrator after he has become aware of the fact that he is, somehow, not allowed to call himself a native, even though he was born on the land where he feels he belongs. He is forced to see himself as an outsider, a stranger indeed, leaving the question of who made him aware of this fact unanswered.

Oeroeg suggests that being European in the Indies was the result of a process of which the force is only realized in retrospect: the narrating person grows up as a

European beyond his own awareness, so to speak. There is only the occasional remark of his father, the purport of which he only realizes when he is an adult, to suggest that this transformation is taking place. It seems the narrator becomes aware of his difference because others around him make themselves different from him, including his best friend, who adopts a distance from him as much as he distances himself from his friend. And eventually that very feeling of being different is expressed in terms of a gaze over the surface of a lake, a mirror-like entity of unfathomable depth.

Identification, *Oeroeg* tells us, is a process that comes from the inside as much as it is imposed by others; it presupposes conflicts and divisions in which both parties engage. However, this colonial situation, the central issue of Indies literature, is hardly ever explicitly explored or even disclosed. In terms of the way these conflicts and divisions are evoked and depicted— notions of supremacy and racism are heterogeneous and multi-layered, and their formation has shifted through time—a history of Indies literature could be organized around, successively, Multatuli, Maurits, Louis Couperus, Maria Dermout, Tjalie Robinson, Hella Haasse, and F. Springer, or rather: *Max Havelaar* (1860), *Nummer Elf* (1893), *De Stille Kracht* (1900), *De Tienduizend Dingen* (1955), *Tjies* (1956), *Oeroeg* (1948), and *Bougainville* (1981), arguably the seven successive linchpins in every attempt to write a chronological survey of Dutch colonial writing. Written for a Dutch public, their Dutch narrators' perceptions of the local population shift from the hazy dream of a comprehensive community in *Max Havelaar* to distinct notions of separation and segregation in *Oeroeg*. By definition, Indies literature focuses on the self-described authoritative Dutch presence in the colonial situation of the Indies; it moves from Multatuli's omniscience towards *Oeroeg's* incomprehension, symbolized by the narrator's shocking surrender to the black lake that pictures the non-Dutch speaking population as well as nature as inarticulateness itself, as a mystery that eventually escapes every form of analysis and explanation.¹²

Indies Literature

Oeroeg is a Dutch novel: it is written in Dutch and deals with problems its Dutch readers can identify with. *Oeroeg* could also be called a colonial novel if we assume, using a short definition, that colonial novels are longer tales situated in a colony, and that the Indies was a colony. *Oeroeg* constitutes part of what within Dutch academia and beyond is now called *Indische literatuur*, a term that refers to more or less artfully composed tales that have something to do with the Indies. Occasionally in circles of scholars and readers a discussion about the appropriateness of this term and its implications flares up. Is there any reason to keep these Dutch texts separate from other literature in the Dutch language and keep them in a ghetto, so to speak, to be read in ways that are different from the ways we read Dutch literature?

The idea of a specific Indies literature was first seriously suggested by E. du Perron, who wrote extensively about Multatuli and about himself, published an anthology of early Dutch writing on the Indies, entitled *De Muze van Jan Companjie*,¹³ and prepared a

¹² See Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 95.

¹³ First published in 1939 by A. C. Nix & Co. in Bandung. A second revised edition appeared in 1948.

second volume, *Van Kraspoekol tot Saidjah*, which was never published, partly due to his untimely death in 1940.¹⁴ Du Perron's suggestion was taken up by Rob Nieuwenhuys, alias E. Breton de Nijs, who, on his return to the Netherlands in the early 1950s, published a number of anthologies, tales, and essays that familiarized Dutch readers with the idea that writings about the Indies were different; his books of photographs representing people, places, and events in the colonial situation¹⁵ merely confirmed the idea in the Netherlands that the Indies were a special place, populated by special people who created distinct ideas, distinct tales, distinct writings. Nieuwenhuys's *magnum opus* appeared in 1972: *Oost Indische Spiegel—Wat Nederlandse schrijvers en dichters over Indonesia hebben geschreven, vanaf de eerste jaren der compagnie tot op heden* (East Indian mirror—what Dutch writers and poets have written about Indonesia, from the first years of the Company until the present) offers an impressive and elegant survey of what people wrote in Dutch about the islands since the beginning of the seventeenth century, the days when the United East Indies Company was founded and notions of the Indies began to emerge next to those of the East Indies and the Dutch Indies.

In his introduction to his *Spiegel*, Nieuwenhuys made it clear that his book offers his readers a survey of a special corpus of texts that are often not "literary" in the conventional Dutch sense, which is predicated on artfulness and fiction. Indies literature, Nieuwenhuys claimed, was a literature of talkers, of tellers of tales who wrote about their experiences in a *parlando* language, reflecting the conversations and discussions people had in their clubs and on their verandahs. Characteristic for Indies literature was not only its sole topic—events and adventures in the Indies—but also its form: lively, colloquial, and realistic. Perhaps most relevant in his justification for the existence of an Indies literature is Nieuwenhuys's description of the authors whose works are given a place in his treasure chest: they spent at least part of their lives in the Indies and wrote and spoke from their own experiences and observations out there.

Since its first publication in 1972, *Oost-Indische Spiegel* has been showered with praise, and rightly so. It is an engaging book. It was a pioneering book, giving comprehensive pictures of outstanding authors and their work, bringing forgotten authors and their tales to the fore again, placing the work of less or better known authors in a distinct context. Written in a style that is as readable as most of the books it talks about, without footnotes (but with an extensive bibliography), the *Spiegel* shows

¹⁴ See also his *Indies Memorandum*, posthumously published in 1946 by De Bezige Bij in Amsterdam, a book of writings about the Indies that should be preserved in the collective memory of Dutch intellectuals, as the title intimates. Given the project-like character of these publications, it is tempting to see them as a first step towards the creation of a "national" Indies literature, which was nipped in the bud as a result of the Japanese invasion of the Indies. Du Perron's novel, *Land van Herkomst* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1935)—often called an anti-novel—could be read as a formal confirmation of these projects. For a report of Du Perron's experiences in the Indies, see Kees Snoek's meticulously researched *De Indische Jaren van E. du Perron* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & van Ditmar, 1995).

¹⁵ E. Breton de Nijs, *Tempo Doeloe: Fotografische documenten uit het oude Indie 1870-1914* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1962) was the first one, in the 1980s followed by three more books. The texts that Nieuwenhuys added to these photographs seems to strengthen the distinctness of the Indies, the Europeans being the only locals worthy of attention. For an interesting description of the concept of *tempo doeloe* and much more, see the intriguing essay by Andrew Goss, "From Tong-Tong to *Tempo Doeloe*: Eurasian Memory Work and the Bracketing of Dutch Colonial History, 1957-1961," *Indonesia* 70 (October 2000): 9-36.

in a very personal, if not idiosyncratic, way that the discursive formation about the Indies has always been in the process of contraction and expansion at once. *Oost-Indische Spiegel* opened up new fields of study. It cleared trails to new ways of reading old texts. It led to a revival of forgotten tales.¹⁶ It led to a wave of new publications about work that focuses on the colonial situation. It expanded the special niche for Indies literature in cultural life.

Oost Indische Spiegel also gave the writers of textbooks about Dutch literature the definite justification they needed for leaving the work of significant, as well as less significant, Indies authors outside the canon of Dutch literature, and it absolved literary historians from the obligation to explore or even mention certain highly praised (and widely read) works and embed them in their surveys and textbooks. That included Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, for instance. And Couperus's *De Stille Kracht*, Daum's *Nummer Elf*, Szekely-Lulofs's *Rubber* (1931), Alberts's *De Eilanden*, Maria Dermout's *De Tienduizend Dingen*, Hella Haasse's *Oeroeg*, Tjalie Robinson's *Tjies*, and Springer's *Bougainville*. Nieuwenhuys was right: there is something special about these works, and they do not fit in the schemes that have been made to organize Dutch literature in terms of movements, generations, and *avant gardes*. But then, perhaps this phenomenon should be formulated the other way around: it is striking how few of the works of so-called Indies authors that are discussed in Nieuwenhuys's book have found a place in the handbooks and textbooks of Dutch literature and how few efforts have been made to incorporate so-called colonial work in surveys of Dutch literature. One can only wonder how differently the "history of Dutch literature" would have looked had Indies literature been given an active role in such a history. Now *Oost Indische Spiegel* took care of them. Indies was a different country. The experiences were special. The emotions were different. The Indies had never been an integral part of the Netherlands' history, and the Indies tradition followed its own path.¹⁷

The haziness of its organizational principles and the arguments that are used for foregrounding certain names and silencing others—Nieuwenhuys had clear preferences and antipathies, and, working in the wake of Du Perron, he was more interested in persons than in their work—has made *Oost Indische Spiegel* an easy target not only of praise,¹⁸ but also of criticism. Most emphatically, it could be argued that the persuasive acts of giving Indies tales a distinct place and putting them in a distinct chest restricts the readability of those tales in ways that are not necessarily desirable or satisfactory. Thus, for instance, the links connecting Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* with contemporary Dutch work tend to be ignored, and with it the possibility of creating interpretations that result from a careful comparison with the novels of, say, Bosboom-

¹⁶The virtual absence of poetry is striking, as if lyrical monologues and the colonial situation of the Indies were unable to put up with one another. See B. Paasman and P. van Zonneveld, eds., *De sarong van Adinda* (Utrecht: Kwadraat, 1992).

¹⁷Beekman's monumental *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), as well as Rob Nieuwenhuys, Bert Paasman, and Peter van Zonneveld's *Oost-Indisch Magazijn: De Geschiedenis van de Indisch-Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Voorsmit, 1990), and *Indisch-Nederlandse literatuur*, ed. Reggie Baay and Peter van Zonneveld (Utrecht: Hes, 1988) read like emulations of *Oost Indische Spiegel* and should equally serve Dutch scholars and critics in their endeavors to keep Indies literature out of Dutch literature.

¹⁸For one, Leiden University, for long a bulwark of scholarly work on the Indies, awarded him a honorary doctorate.

Toussaint or Van Eeden. The place of *De Stille Kracht* in Couperus's oeuvre as a whole, and the distinct readings that such an embedding could generate, are hardly ever explored. Too easily it has been assumed that Dermout's *De Tienduizend Dingen* is a wonderful example of Indonesian ways of telling stories, while in fact it is not, if only because the use of the term "Indonesian" is an anachronism and a generalization. And why should Dutch tales about the Indies that were written by people who never visited or lived in the Indies not count as Indies literature?¹⁹

The lively conversations Nieuwenhuys's *magnum opus* generated since its publication were authoritatively summarized by Olf Praamstra in an essay entitled "De omstreden bloei van de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde."²⁰ Like most scholars who, arguing in favor of the species specifics of Indies literature, have kept it in a ghetto, Praamstra, too, seems more interested in the authors than in the work they wrote. He offers a two-fold definition that echoes *Oost Indische Spiegel's* main assumptions: Indies literature "is written by people who have known Dutch Indies society from their own experience [*ervaring*]" and consists of "works that were originally written in the Dutch language."²¹ The primacy of the authors over their words is not explained, the priority of Dutch perspectives over "native" perspectives not questioned, and the "natives'" opinions were hardly ever discussed at all. The possibility that the alleged realism of Indies novels is the result of following generic conventions and wordings prevalent in Dutch writing rather than of having experiences in a foreign locale is not really taken into account. Perhaps most importantly, the notion of "experience" that is evoked here as being the basis of writing is not explored either. Is *ervaring*, for instance, the shock-like, disruptive, and hence memorable event, which is recast in a novel, that superb manifestation of modernity? Or does the word refer to a continuity of being, the familiar endurance, the repetitive and passive acceptance of events as expressed and handed down by already familiar tales? And is it, therefore, reminiscent of the tales of storytellers who describe events as they happen in the certainty that their significance will shine through on their own, independent of any subjective interference?²² Experience as the flow of life—or as a fragmentary series of shocks?

Equally revealing in Praamstra's article are the calculations he undertook on the basis of Buur's bibliography of Indies literature.²³ A crude summary of his findings shows that between 1800 and 1970 some 1,350 texts (articles in periodicals excluded) were published that, on the basis of his definition, together could be called Indies literature,²⁴ and of those 1,350 texts only 210 were published in the Indies.²⁵ The

¹⁹ See e.g. Will Derks, "Allerzonderlingst ontuchtig: Over een Indisch verhaal van F. Bordewijk," in *De Revisor* 13,6 (1986): 67-79; and H. M. J. Maier, "Rood Paleis, een Indische roman van F. Bordewijk," in *Literatuur* 12 (1995): 217-223.

²⁰ Praamstra, "De omstreden bloei van de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde" (The controversial bloom of Indies-Dutch literature), in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 113, aflevering 3 (1997): 257-274. For unclear reasons, "Indies-Dutch literature" has been substituted for "Dutch Indies literature."

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

²² See Walter Benjamin's essay in *Über Literatur* (Frankfurt: A. M. Suhrkamp, 1961).

²³ D. Buur, *Persoonlijke documenten Nederlands-Indie/Indonesie, keuze bibliografie* (Leiden: KITLV, 1973).

²⁴ Praamstra, "De omstreden bloei van de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde," p. 267.

conclusion seems so self-evident that Praamstra does not even take the trouble to draw it: materially speaking, the so-called Indies literature was embedded in Dutch literary life, where it had to compete with other Dutch tales for the attention of critics, buyers, sellers, and readers alike, and these material circumstances alone should have inspired critics and scholars to follow the example of the few readers and authors who have taken so-called Indies literature to be an integral part of Dutch literature, rather than as a separate alien entity. Obviously and perhaps paradoxically, literary work about the Indies did not function in the Indies, but in the Netherlands, where the Dutch language has generated and maintained, among many other things, tales about the colonial situation which were interwoven with many other tales of love, life, and death by critics, readers, and bookshops alike.²⁵ "Sometimes it is said that we Dutch people know very little about Indies situations, but if that is true, literature or our authors can not be blamed; they offered us many a picture of beautiful Insulinde," the Dutch journal *De Tijdspiegel* wrote in 1895. The novels of authors such as Maurits, Therèse Hoven, Melati van Java, Jacob Dermoût, and Perelaer, who offered these pictures of Insulinde, were widely and thoughtfully reviewed in leading cultural journals in the Netherlands. Maurits, for instance, was praised for his talent to tell a tale, his "sharp eye" and "speedy pen," which allowed him to "achieve a great effect in a few lines," but he was also criticized as being yet another of "those people who claim to give a voice to all these petty and broody grievances and self-interests of our white and half-black brothers and sisters overseas." Indies was far away, but these were Dutch authors who deserved serious attention because they made contributions to Dutch culture. Not much later, Couperus's *De Stille Kracht*, one of the cornerstones in Nieuwenhuys's Indies literature, was discussed in the same spirit of inclusion. It was dismissed as "yet another very simple ghost story" and as "quasi mysterious," and one of its main protagonists, Leonie van Oudijck, was described as "being perhaps too exotic for a late afternoon tea party but certainly not an inconceivable figure." Yet despite this early inclination to treat Dutch narratives about the Indies as part of Dutch literature, gradually literary work about the colonial situation was becoming marginalized in literary conversations.

If we assume that Nieuwenhuys's criteria have gained prevalence, and we follow the predominant attitude among contemporary readers and critics in the Netherlands, we should take it for granted that Indies literature is a distinctive and isolated group of casually worded, realistic texts written by people who experienced the Indies in person. In that case, there will soon be an end to the unfolding of Indies literature, for of the people who directly experienced life in the colony, few are left, and of those people even fewer produce fiction that could help expand Indies literature and shape our ideas and views about the Indies, as every Dutch literary work concerned with the region should do. Within a couple of years, the last writers on the Indies will have

²⁵ Ibid., p. 271. In this connection, it is also noteworthy to quote Haasse's more recent remark that "relatively speaking, no other colonial region has produced so many authors in the language of the colonizing power than the Dutch East Indies." Hella S. Haasse, *Een hondvol achtergrond "Parang Sawat": Autobiografische teksten* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1993), p. 166.

²⁶ See Jacqueline Bel's fascinating study about literary life in the Netherlands around 1900, *Nederlandse literatuur in het fin de siècle: Een receptie-historisch overzicht van het proza tussen 1885 and 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1993), which shows how much Indies literature was a part of literary life in the Netherlands in the beginning of the twentieth century.

become mere memories, including the author of *Oeroeg*. Before long, the chest can be closed, the witnesses of the Indies, that never-never land, be definitely catalogued, and the colonial situation, only vaguely echoed in schoolbooks and newspapers, be deleted for good.²⁷

Oost Indische Spiegel has already foreshadowed this death of Indies literature in its own structure: work that was written about the colonial situation after the Second World War is only mentioned in a coda-like final chapter. Soon enough, Nieuwenhuys seems to suggest, the direct experience will no longer be repeated, and the direct representation of that experience, a corpus of displacements, a realism of sorts, will no longer be complemented either. We will be left with personal memories that are bound gradually to turn into memories of memories, slowly fading into nostalgia and dreams, two notions that, even for present-day readers, are hard to reconcile with the vitality and realism so characteristic of colonial literature, of Indies literature, the so-called mirror of Indies life.²⁸

In interpretations of *Oeroeg*, Haasse herself has, more or less unintentionally, given an outline of the characteristic tendencies that successively and interactively dominated Indies literature. Reading her work with care, we see how this literature has developed from Multatuli's efforts to comprehend the native—via an exploration of racism and an opening up to desires—to efforts by later authors to verbalize early personal experiences. First attempts at mutual understanding; then interest in the unknown other and searches for the unknown self; and eventually longings for a dream world. From the participant's omniscience and trust in objectivity to the outsider's interchangeable perspectives: *Oeroeg* accommodates them all. *Oeroeg* is strong enough, so it seems, to be read as the summary of Indies literature.

In a speech she delivered shortly after De Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels had revealed she was the author of *Oeroeg* in 1948, Haasse told her public that she wanted to make a contribution to "the improvement of mutual understanding" (*verbetering van de wederzijdse verstandhouding*). A more conventional phrase is hardly conceivable; it sounds like a flimsy echo of the numerous speeches of politicians about the situation in the world, as much as a thin variation on the

²⁷ Praamstra, "De omstrede bloei van de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde," p. 266, speaks of "the closed character of this literature" and adds, ". . . it is matter of waiting for the death of the last author who knew the Dutch Indies from his/her own experience." In the final paragraph of his article, Praamstra follows up on this: "Experience tells us that if the Indies literature were incorporated in Dutch literature, most Indies authors would be eliminated. That is inevitable, similar to the case of Dutch authors who are discussed in the context of a history of European literature. One of the functions of literary history, and not the least important one, is to ask attention be paid to authors who would be irrevocably forgotten in any other way." Indies literature should be organized according to a literary history on its own, in short, but it remains to be seen if the organization of a limited corpus on the basis of authorship is necessary and relevant. After all, literature is a matter of reading, and literary history is nothing but a construction of the future that is undertaken by readers rather than writers.

²⁸ Nieuwenhuys could be blamed for giving a sense of nostalgia—that eerie longing for a home that no longer exists and is replaced by an imaginary one of beauty and warmth—to Indies literature which its realism and vitality defies. Occasionally Haasse herself seems aware of the nostalgia among those who are living in the diaspora; witness for instance a remark she made in her later reflections: "I share this wealth of impressions with many, they share the inexhaustible source for nostalgia for a lost time. After my last [or: latest] visit to Java in 1976, I forbade myself from having *tempo dulu heimwee*." In Haasse, *Een handvol*, p. 164.

conversations in the Netherlands about other Dutch novels set in faraway places. About the work of Slauerhoff and Helman, for instance, and Van Schendel. Of course there was no mutuality in those speeches and novels. They all were one-sided performances; leaving the “other” side unheard and unexpressed, they suggest some desire for comprehension at the most.

Time goes by, literary life goes on. Haasse was to rephrase her interpretation in her first autobiographical work, *Zelfportret als legkaart* (Self-portrait as a jigsaw puzzle, 1954). Writing *Oeroeg*, she confessed, had been inspired

. . . by a longing for the real Indies life that I did not really know and by the secret feeling of guilt towards the Indonesian man whom in my youth I had accepted as the setting, as a self-evident part of my environment; I never consciously perceived him, no matter how many exterior details I remember to this very day.²⁹

The memories of her experiences were being displaced, it seems; sentences and experiences of the Indies had to find a different place in the fast shifting configuration of her more recent words.

Personal experiences and memories, hovering closely over Haasse’s writing, continued to shift. Some years later she offered a third interpretation of *Oeroeg*, which slowly moved away from referentiality: she had written the tale “as a statement of longing and of affection for the land where I was born and where I grew up—and behind that, under it, of a desire to unravel my own dark side, the side in the shadow, which I do not know.”³⁰ Writing is now seen as an exploration of her own unknown aspects, dark as a lake, dark as an enigma that can apparently be illuminated by way of words. Writing becomes a way to present, if not create, feelings and experiences the author did not know of before, rather than a way to repeat experiences and feelings—and the colonial situation certainly contained dark places of horror.

Some years later, Haasse came up with yet another interpretation of her own tale. Now the distance from the Indies, rather than personal emotions, was made the central issue—*Indië* had to be created in words that could serve as the place where memories could be situated. “*Oeroeg*,” she wrote,

. . . was consciously written from the stance of the “I” figure, a Dutch boy who (because his father is afraid of *Indiesation*) spent his high school days at a boarding school in Batavia, more or less isolated, under restrictive supervision. When he returns to the Indies after his years of war and study, he has irrevocably outgrown every possibility to be one with the world of his own infancy in an unrestrained way. *Oeroeg* is the history of gradually losing contact with the native soil [*geboortegrond*], with the Javanese friend of youth. When I wrote the tale in 1947, I wanted to return in my imagination to my land of birth, by way of the return of the “I”-figure to Java, so to speak; no doubt this was to experience once more what I had experienced as a child, every time I came “home” in Java after a

²⁹ Hella S. Haasse, *Zelfportret als legkaart* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1954), p. 102.

³⁰ Hella S. Haasse, *Persoonsbewijs* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1967), pp. 66-67.

period of separation. I had no other tools to bridge the distance but the pictures of memory, sensory impressions.³¹

Writing of the Indies has become a work of the imagination.

Hella Haasse

Oeroeg was Hella Haasse's first published novel, and she had a long way to go before she was publicly appreciated as the grand old lady of Dutch literature, blessed with the highest literary honors in the Netherlands (the Huygens and Hooft Prizes among them), and a loyal reading public.³² As it turned out, the Indies was not to be the central theme of the novels, short stories, and essays that she published over a period of fifty years after *Oeroeg*. Not the Indies, but history was the faraway place she tried to return to, creating displacements of her experiences in the Indies along another track. Haasse became known as the author who saved the genre of the historical novel from extinction in the Netherlands, and she broke the rules of genres to that end.³³ It could be argued—and it has indeed been argued before—that Haasse's fascination with history was inspired by her self-described feelings of estrangement and alienation in the Netherlands, a land which she perceived against the background of her experiences in Java, "green and glossy."³⁴ It is as if the past was substituted for Java, equally distant, equally puzzling, equally wanting for solutions and decorations, but not as painful, not as disturbing.

It would be incorrect to state that Haasse's work is inspired by the simple desire of representing history, presumably a basic drive for everyone writing and reading historical novels. Historical reality has too many dimensions to be pictured in a linear sequence; patterns and lines are needed, and they repeat history in necessarily disfigured forms. In more recent interviews about her craft—Haasse has always been willing to reflect and talk about her work and her life, thus more or less intentionally

³¹ Haasse, *Een handvol*, p. 190.

³² Translations of many of Haasse's works, including *Oeroeg*, have appeared in other European languages and have often received rave reviews, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy, where she has found many admirers. Indonesian translations have never been made, and in the land of her birth she is an unknown.

³³ The report of the Jury of the P. C. Hooft prijs (the National Prize for Literature) in 1985 speaks of "the literary construction, the reflection upon fiction by way of that fiction itself, the use of simultaneous perspectives, structures of parallelism, and techniques of assembly." Interestingly enough, these honors and awards did not win Haasse recognition in any survey of Dutch literature; neither did the fact that most of her novels were bestsellers.

³⁴ "The Indies made it possible for me to experience a first natural relationship with reality, like a child feels in her parental home. In my parental home was included, almost self-evident, a partial strangeness, the awareness that there were certain aspects beyond me and that I would always remain an outsider. Java reconciled me with my state of being. I belonged there and I did not, but that paradox was endurable because of the overwhelming many-ness [*het overweldigende vele*], which through my senses became my possession for good. Java has become my inner landscape. Nature is a close-by world, full of secrets. The secretive is almost tangibly present, often one can see it. The twilight in the jungle, the sometimes deceptive perspectives of the *sawah* scenery, shining and multicolored green terraces evading and rising into distant mountains surrounded by mist—whimsical, treacherous sometimes, in the atmosphere of the land—all of that seems related to an unknowable element in my own existence of which I have always been aware." Haasse, *Een handvol*, p. 170.

creating a community of sorts, as becomes a storyteller—she has more than once explained that her efforts to create an order in her observations and experiences in the world are driven by a longing for some kind of coherence and fulfillment, no matter how loose and deceptive, in the green and gloss of Java. Order could be created by the imagination, impelled by that strange desire to decorate the world and make connections in a labyrinth by way of various threads, by combining fragments of texts that are usually categorized as representatives of different genres such as essay, journalism, letter, autobiography. Instead of describing the historical world as it was, puzzling and confusing, efforts are made to summarize it by way of stylized forms. “Perfect puzzles without a solution,” as one of her careful readers has recently characterized Haasse’s work.³⁵

If this author is committed to creating a decorated picture of the world in a comprehensive manner rather than evoking the chaos of that very world itself, then no wonder she has been called an old-fashioned storyteller.³⁶ It seems as if many of her early historical novels were meant to give counsel as much as they explored the meaning of life, to formulate it in Benjaminian terms. Only gradually that counsel, based on experience as a matter of passive endurance and acceptance of the infinite string of events, experience so effectively evoked in *Oeroeg*, lost ground to the exploration of the meaning of life based on experience as the fragmentary confrontation with the evenness of passing hours and years, as explored in Haasse’s *Mevrouw Bentinck*.³⁷ The modernist author was being substituted for the old-fashioned teller of tales, concurrent with the development of Dutch literature as a whole.

After publishing a number of novels about topics, events, and persons from European history,³⁸ in 1970 Haasse published another book that could be categorized as Indies literature and that made her an Indies author once again. It is discussed in Nieuwenhuys’s *Oost Indische Spiegel*, albeit somewhat reluctantly. *Krassen op een rots—notities bij een reis op Java*³⁹ reads like a personal report of a journey she made to New Order Indonesia in 1969. It is another multi-generic puzzle: a collage of memories of her youth, entries from an early diary, observations about modern Indonesia, anthropological descriptions and historical reflections, intermingled with short stories written some twenty-five years before and the text of a lecture on her life in Batavia in the 1930s, which she delivered in Yogyakarta in the Dutch Cultural Center. It is a

³⁵ cf. Aleid Truijens, *Hella S. Haasse: Draden Trekken door het Labyrinth* (Nijmegen: Sun-Kritak, 1997).

³⁶ Haasse’s editor, Anthony Mertens, gives this characterization of Haasse’s first historical novel, *Het woud der verwachting* (1949) in his *Retour Grenoble: Anthony Mertens in gesprek met Hella S. Haasse* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2003), p. 17: “I admired the craftsmanship with which a story was told, and the book reminded me of the old-fashioned pleasure of reading, of the way I used to devour big thick books from the library.”

³⁷ These formulations are inspired by Edward M. Bruner’s “Introduction” to *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

³⁸ e.g. *De Scharlaken Stad* (1952), *De Ingewijden* (1957), *Een Nieuwer Testament* (1966), *Mevrouw Bentinck of Onverenigbaarheid van Karakter* (1978), all of them published by Querido in Amsterdam.

³⁹ Hella Haasse, *Krassen op een rots: Notities bij een reis op Java* (Scratches on a rock: Notes on the occasion of a journey on Java) (Amsterdam: Querido, 1970). The title plays on a telling sentence from a work by Willem Walraven, one of the final heroes of *Oost-Indische Spiegel*: “We are losing out here, either we ourselves or our progeny, but they do not change. Not even a little scratch on a rock is our influence.” (*Wij leggen het hier af, zelf, of in ons nageslacht, maar aan hen verandert niets. Nog geen krasje op een rots betekent onze invloed*).

confusing book, in short, reflecting Haasse's own confusion, so it seems, about being back in her land of birth, and she leaves it to the reader to make sense of the enigmatic juxtapositions of tales, themes, and topics contained between the two covers.⁴⁰ The construction of the narrative (or narratives) is strongly reminiscent of the way she had composed her previous novels (including *Oeroeg*) in that here, too, personal documents are interwoven with historical descriptions and writerly observations in ways that make it inexpedient to unravel the texture.⁴¹

Krassen op een rots perfectly fits the description Haasse was to give of her method of writing some twenty years later, and in this connection it is telling that she confessed to feel a deep affinity with other so-called Indies authors such as Walraven, Alberts, and Dermout on the very same page she describes this method. They, too, were shaped by "the swarming and bristling life of Java's nature" in which there is "no distinction between the nature outside and the inner existence." They, too, were driven by a "force that connects everything in an immense web of reality."

I have always had the tendency to bring an as-large-as-possible number of diverging data together in one bond. Nothing gives me more inner satisfaction than recognizing and verbalizing a complex of observations, experiences, impressions, thoughts, fabrications. Almost automatically a composition becomes, in this way, a structure of dissimilar elements; pieces of fiction, reflections, reports, flashbacks. In a batik textile, geometrical figures and stylized motives of plants and flowers often fill the available space up to the edges, in a dense bristle. *Parang sawat* is the name of this typically Javanese batik pattern, which (. . .) confronts us with a true spillikin of meaning. Anyone who knows my work will discover—I hope—that the desire for *Parang Sawat* is my Indies heritage.⁴²

Heren van de Thee (The tea lords, 1992) was Haasse's third book-long composition that explicitly deals with the Indies, with the colonial situation. Another play on historical reality, the book received laudatory reviews and definitely established her as the grand old lady of Dutch literature. Since its publication in 1992, more than 300,000 copies of *Heren van de Thee* have been sold, in the Dutch context a stunning number. In a conversation with her editor, Anthony Mertens, some ten years later, Haasse herself came up with a revealing explanation of the novel's success:

You should not forget how many people in the Netherlands still have memories of "the Indies" because they were born there or grew up there, or because they lived and worked there. Perhaps the great interest has to do with the fact that the novel offers an insight into the perseverance and adaptability of pioneers and that it illuminates valuable aspects of entrepreneurship in the Indies and, in more

⁴⁰ Later Haasse was to confirm that *Krassen* is a strongly autobiographical work, written in an effort "to take a distance from the country, to analyze what the concept of Java contains for her." Haasse, *Een handvol*, p. 175.

⁴¹ Similar techniques were used in F. Springer's *Bandoeng, Bandung* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1993), a novel that also, in its search for the meaning of the colonial situation, cannot but remind us of both *Krassen* and *Oeroeg*. If there is a difference, it is a difference of emotion: Springer's confrontation between past and present seems much more painful and direct, less "literary" and "decorative."

⁴² Haasse, *Een handvol*, opening page, and pp. 194-95.

general terms, the activities of a certain group of Dutchmen in the colonies. That kind of entrepreneurship and that mentality of pioneers, you cannot simply throw them together with the reprehensible activities and abuses that were brought into the open and have rightly been criticized.⁴³

Heren van de Thee tells the story of the life and adventures of Rudolf van Kerkhoven, scion of a famous Dutch family that made its money “in the tea” in Western Java during the second half of the nineteenth century. *Heren* is a historical novel, a forcefully commemorative narrative about a faraway situation, populated by people who existed in historical time; it is a strong representative of a genre that enjoyed a revival in Dutch literature in the final decades of the twentieth century, in part thanks to Haasse’s work. *Heren van de Thee* could also be read as an Indies novel if we use the criteria set out by Praamstra: it is a Dutch narrative about the Indies, written by someone who has experienced the Indies (“I know that world from my own experience”). It could also be called a documentary novel: the backbone of the tale consists of the letters written by people who lived in West Java around 1870, which Haasse found in one of the many family archives in the Netherlands. The historical documents are “arranged according to the rules demanded by writing a novel,” she remarks in the introduction of the book, leaving the reader to decide what is fiction and what historiography in this collage of extensive quotations from letters, dairies, and self-portraits authored by historical, “real-life” figures, combined with authorial comments and descriptions. Taken altogether, this hybrid creation is an exploration of the tensions between trust in objectivity and omniscience versus surrender to the interchangeability and relativity of perspectives. Van Kerkhoven’s enterprise is bound to fail, and not only does he lose his plantations and his vigor in the Indies, he also loses his wife, who commits suicide—an absolute dissolution, so to speak, and the trigger for an allegorical reading at that.

The colonial situation had positive aspects, Haasse seems to argue in *Heren van de Thee*.⁴⁴ Or perhaps the activities of people like the Holle and van Kerkhoven families, the heroes of the novel, should not be categorized as “colonial,” since these characters did not play a part in a system of repression, but rather in the comprehensive community of the Indies, in which also Multatuli, their contemporary, seems to have thrived. Foregrounding the heroic character of Van Kerkhoven’s enterprise, the book heralds an uneasy revisionism if not nostalgia of sorts, an attitude that, in disquieting ways, concurs with post-war Dutch historiography of the Indies, which foregrounded descriptions of glorious Dutch achievements while analysis of the colonial situation was allowed to recede from view.

⁴³ Mertens, *Retour Grenoble*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ In an interview in 1995, Haasse was very explicit about her intentions: “I want to challenge forcefully the assumption that I had neo-colonial intentions with my history of the planter Rudolf van Kerkhoven and his family. ‘Neo-colonial,’ that is a term that can only be invented by people who consciously give a negative explanation to everything the Netherlands have done in the Indies. The book is no justification. There were misunderstandings, there was exploitation, but there was also mutual understanding. That is not my interpretation. I show the situation as it was in a certain sector of Indies society, based on authentic letters and other documents. Moreover, I know that world from my own experience. The 1880s were in my youth just as distant as the 1950s are for us now. At that time it was still swarming with people who had experienced it by themselves.” Remco Meijer, ed., *Oostindisch doof*, pp. 24-25.

Decoration, the Chest, and the Key

Stylization could be described as the apparent victory of words over reality, and stylization is the central theme of *Sleuteloog*, Haasse's latest novel, published in the fall of 2002. *Sleuteloog* (Key eye, or Key hole⁴⁵) has been welcomed by critics in the Netherlands as her "ultimate" and "comprehensive" work. The tale was seen as "a summary" of her literary oeuvre, her life, her authorship, and it was the ultimate proof that Haasse is essentially an Indies author. The book was also a resounding success in public terms. For months it remained on the bestsellers' list, that uneasy effort of commercialism to protect the lofty position of the "men and women of letters" who might otherwise fade from the public eye. It was nominated for several awards, and eventually it won the so-called Public Award (Publieksprijs), initiated by the Foundation for Collective Propaganda of the Dutch Book (Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek, CPNB⁴⁶). *Sleuteloog's* success showed, among many other things, that interest in the Indies is still strong in the Netherlands. No doubt most people would call it an "Indies novel."

Sleuteloog is a short book that consists of a series of short tales. Narrated in the first-person singular, the past—life in the Indies—and the present—life in the Netherlands—struggle for predominance from beginning to end. Events are organized in a retrospective narrative that is constantly interrupted by reflections on present-day life, and vice versa. Those are not the only correspondences with *Oeroeg*. Once again, the relationship between two human beings of the same sex in the Indies is described, and once again this relationship ends in dissolution, the result of differences that, rendered in individual terms, again illuminate historical divisions between rulers and ruled in terms of race, class, and economy. Since its first publication, *Oeroeg* has been an easy read, and the same could be said of *Sleuteloog* fifty years later; its polyvocal and dense construction—there are at least two narrators, some sixty years are covered in some 190 pages, there are many retrospective passages and reflections, and the narrative lines meander—makes it a conventional Dutch novel in the 1990s, and hence it should not cause too many problems to the average Dutch reader. Moreover, the novel's central thematic notions—chest, key, decoration—lend themselves to allegorical interpretation just as easily as do certain words in *Oeroeg*—lake, plantation, a servant's death, war.

Sleuteloog, however, is more than a *Bildungsroman* in that the narrative extends beyond a description of the protagonist's formation in the Indies, offering in addition

⁴⁵ The Dutch word *sleuteloog* is a word that bristles with associations, evoking observation, peeping, and mystery. However, from the description on page 118 it may be concluded that the word is meant to refer not to the key hole, but to the iron ring around the key hole; in this passage, such an iron ring is covered with Arabic characters that leave an impression on Warner's fingers when she tries to turn the key. In this meaning, the word *sleuteloog* is a neologism.

⁴⁶ The annual Award is based on the number of votes given to one book from a list of bestselling books; formally speaking, it means that *Sleuteloog* was the most appreciated Dutch literary work of 2002. CPNB, by the way, is the successor of the Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels that published *Oeroeg* in 1948 on the basis of another voting system; for Haasse, the circle seems almost closed along different lines.

pictures of her adulthood and old age in the Netherlands. Moreover, the novel goes beyond a reportorial, cool retrospective account of two people's friendship and eventual separation, as it creates a decorated and stylized solution to explain the puzzling tensions between two people who were bound to be friends for life. Most importantly, events in *Sleuteloog* are only partly located in the Indies, and for that reason alone the book could be seen as a subversive challenge to the definition of Indies literature as developed by Praamstra and his predecessors. What to do with tales that only partially take place in the Indies and present experiences not exclusively based in the Indies? What to do with tales that evoke the Indies against the background of the Netherlands, i.e. the country, its language, its culture, the burning issues? And, on second thought, is this not what every "*Indische roman*" does?

Sleuteloog should force us to reconsider Nieuwenhuys's definition for yet another reason: the narrative is not based on experiences but, rather, experiences are created by the narrative. In the spirit of the shortcut conclusion that is made by *Oeroeg's* narrator—the Dutch and the Indonesians had nothing in common—this "Indies novel" should make us aware of the fact that it is possible to draw another radical conclusion: experiences in the Indies are evoked by the words on the page.

In *Sleuteloog*, the character Helma Warner, an art historian in her seventies, writer of several books on decorative arts, is approached by a journalist named Moorland, who is in search of information about Dee Mijers, alias Mila Wychinska, an old friend of hers with whom she has lost contact. Invited to look back on her adolescent days in Batavia, Warner tries to reconstruct their shared experiences in the Indies. She has nothing but her memories to go by; the papers, documents, and photographs that could have helped her confirm or support her construction of the past are preserved in a chest, an heirloom of her father's, and she is unable to open it: the key has been lost. By way of associations, Warner tries not only to evoke a picture of her life in the Indies, while constantly doubting that her memories are correct, but also to recollect fragments of her life after her forced departure from the Indies, a part of her life in which, next to Dee Mijers, her late husband played a predominant role. Her husband was a historian born in the Indies, just like her, who at the time of his death was working on a book about the seventeenth-century humanist-merchant, Reael. Through this investigative process, Warner concludes that Dee became a global activist and had more than a friendly relationship with her husband; continuing her associative thinking, she eventually concludes that a rich Japanese industrialist who has published a book on decorative arts in Indonesia is a son of Dee Mijer. Thus, everything fits together neatly—but it is a fantasy, a victory of words over reality.

Not until the pieces of the puzzle of friendships ruined and loves lost have been brought together and the chaos warded off by way of decorations—another "perfect puzzle without a solution"—does Warner find the key. However, she is wise enough to leave it to the journalist to open the chest containing documents and personal papers. In *Sleuteloog's* final letter, Moorland informs her that he found the chest empty, and that the Persian text⁴⁷ on the "key eye" said: "whatever you ever saw or heard, everything you thought to know, is no longer that, but different."

⁴⁷ Even the text on the *sleuteloog* is different than previously described: Warner assumed it was written in Arabic, but it is Persian.

The message seems clear enough: Warner's experiences are not hers. The life she has evoked is not hers. She has created a fantasy. Haasse shows through her alter ego that her tales about her experiences in the Indies, the Netherlands, and Indonesia are not concerned with representing or repeating experiences by way of language, but with experiencing language through a destruction or subversion of representation.⁴⁸ Warner's recollections are a struggle with language as much as with the desire to represent her experiences, and this she confesses on the very first page of her tale.

Since long ago I have been aware that the sunken world of my youth was largely an illusion. I have been through the various stages of farewell and defamiliarization. What I have experienced in terms of senses and emotions in the land of my birth lies anchored on the bottom of my consciousness, it determines me, but I cannot reach it any more, it is beyond my reach. I have accepted the fact that I do not belong anywhere as my natural state of being. It gives me the freedom to assimilate, or to keep a distance, whatever suits me best. Incorrectly, my friend Dee considered that characteristic typical for the Belanda who, as she put it, is able to behave like a chameleon in order to gain control over the place where he want to dominate. Perhaps she has later come to understand that it is my way to live with this inner dissolution, characteristic for both of us.⁴⁹

Experiences are beyond reach in the act of telling, and Warner is forced to rely on acts of association and assimilation, making connections and creating tales on the basis of the words that make themselves available to her, driven by a desire to form a tale with a stylized order from a "vague and formless mass," a metaphor of a chaotic entity that seems to replace another metaphor, the green and gloss of Java. *Sleuteloog* is a displaced tale of the Indies that is made out of language and desire rather than a tale that registers reality and experience. The protagonist's search for her experiences is not the force that moves the tale, for instead the "formless and vague mass" acts as the key motivating force, and if anything the narrative does not recover the past but rather is firmly attached to the present, made from the ruins of the past:

Something wants to be known, to be expressed, but I do not know what it is. It remains hidden, somewhere under the surface of my consciousness. It has been in hiding for years. When I am honest to myself, I have to admit that I was aware of the existence of this formless, vague mass that has never threatened me as long as I would leave it alone. By calling up all those memories of the past, it is as if I am breaking open a protective partition. Against my will, a certain awareness seeps in that I have to ask questions. But then, which questions?⁵⁰

The relationship between two friends in the Indies, torn apart by their search for well-defined identities that they will never grasp, is, like the relationship between the two friends in *Oeroeg*, worth a separate analysis, in particular because the dissolution of both friendships is presented in various time layers simultaneously. If we are focused on questions concerning the relevance of the notion of "Indies literature," however,

⁴⁸ This formulation is inspired by Andre Brink's rephrasing of Colin MacCabe's explanation of the work of James Joyce in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1978). See Andre Brink, *The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁹ Haasse, *Sleuteloog*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

then other aspects of this novel are more interesting, not least of which is the formal energy that the narrator, the aged widow, art historian, and writer Helma Warner,⁵¹ generates to shape the memories of her experiences. *Sleuteloog's* narrative evolves along a double series of recollections: the recollections that Warner writes to herself about her Batavian friend, Dee Mijers, and the letters of the journalist, Moorland, who is in search of information about Dee Mijers, alias Mila Wychinska. From Moorland's questions and remarks—journalists are uneasy mediators between reality and fiction—the recollections that Warner shares in her letters to him can only be partially reconstructed, and they seem to serve as a supplement to her notes to herself. In this process of double writing, Warner gradually becomes desperate about the relevance and reliability of her own recollections and, as a result, creates an increasingly uncanny picture of her life.

The ambivalent recall of experience and reality fails, and Warner herself realizes that her experiences in the Indies are gone: "I read again what I wrote in the past few days. Not a single lie, I experienced it all, I was there and then, I was present—and it seems as if it is about someone else."⁵² The gaps between experience and memories of experience, on the one hand, and between memory and language, on the other, are felt like a configuration of black holes and worse: "My memory is full of black holes and twilight zones. I am no longer sure of things I thought I knew when I started these notes."⁵³

A recurrent image in this doubled and fragmented tale about failing memories and displaced experiences is Warner's search for the key of a chest in which, she thinks, all the more or less personal documents related to her experiences in the Indies are preserved; these documents should serve to confirm, to herself as much as to the journalist Moorland, that the memories of her experiences are correct and that they are not mere displacements created by language, but representations of real facts. Another central image is Warner's personal and professional obsession with decoration, allegedly inspired by her early fascination with the stylization of the batik and Chinese embroidery she saw as a young girl on the verandah of Dee Mijer's mother; for her, writing about decoration is "like a study of forms in which the coming together of dissoluteness and control takes shape in various cultures."⁵⁴

The key is found only when the meandering fragments of memories that have lost contact with experiences have been sufficiently gathered and the decorations are in place, like in a *parang sawat* batik, though ever ready to dissolve again; the appearance of the Japanese son of Dee Mijer seems only the last element in a series of increasingly improbable evocations. However, when the chest is opened, it turns out to be empty, as noted earlier, and Warner could not care less. She has already created the tale of her own life and the lives of those who were allegedly dear to her. She no longer needs the

⁵¹ Given Warner's musings on the act of writing, experience, and the green of Java, as much as her careful descriptions of her Batavian background, her disconcerting disorientation in Indonesia, and her fascination with the puzzling qualities of batik patterns, every knowledgeable and author-focused reader would be tempted to interpret her as an alter ego of Haasse herself.

⁵² Haasse, *Sleuteloog*, p. 61.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

remnants of reality or of experience, for that matter. The stylized and decorated tale she has constructed about relationships, about love, life, and death in the Indies, the Netherlands and Indonesia has made her realize that her marriage with her teenage sweetheart, born and raised in the Indies just like her, was not as happy as she always had remembered it to be and that the puzzles concerning her closest friends in life are bound to remain unsolved beyond the framework of her tale, just like the colonial situation.

Memory and Experience

“Experience” (*ervaring*) is not only the backbone of every current definition and delimitation of Indies literature. The word has become equally predominant in the more recent work and interviews of Haasse who, as the author of *Oeroeg* and *Heren van de Thee*, is now regarded as the perfect representative for Indies literature and its progenitors, born and raised in the Indies. Somehow she has publicly tried to come to terms with the idea that her acts of writing in *parang sawat* form have not only been inspired by the texts she read as a young girl in her father’s library, the novels of Oltmans, van Lennep, and Verne, but are also based on her personal feelings of being uprooted from the world of the green and glossy Indies. “I carry an amorphous mass of images and impressions with me, of which I only know that they belong together.”⁵⁵ Her writing has been shaped by the effort of imposing order and “togetherness” upon amorphousness and dissoluteness, the never completed and always failing attempt to name her experiences—or, rather, the memories of these experiences: “the images and impressions”—which she tries to escape as she is carried along by narrative forces and discursive conventions that, in the acts of writing and reading, evoke that very world “of somebody different.”

Sleuteloog tells us that “experience” tends to be an empty word that wants to be filled with sentences, so to speak, like an empty chest, like the green and gloss of Java—and in the tension between the reader’s expectation to see experiences represented and the writer’s realization that memories are constantly fading, Indies literature, defined in terms of experiences and their memories, seems to come to an end again and again, only to be constantly revived by other words, by different sentences.

Memory then seems like an infinite and repetitive writing of a past that we call experience, and that past is so much filled with the present that it turns into a green and glossy jungle that will never be captured by its displacements and yet tries to overgrow them all. “All you thought to know is no longer that but different,” says the empty hole for which the key is eventually found. If anything, *Sleuteloog* shows that writing determines “experiences,” which are created by words rather than the other way around. We keep on writing and thinking about *Indië*. We create it again and again. We keep on trying to make it into experiences. And it keeps escaping us. And we are trying to escape the Indies.

Reading is different from experience, and so is writing: the desire to catch experience moves us to the present. And of course *Indië* has not ended. The word keeps on floating around in Dutch conversations, to be filled and refilled time and again. In

⁵⁵ Haasse, *Een handvol*, p. 130.

her search for past experiences in the Indies, Warner feels compelled to embed her tales about the Indies in tales about Indonesia and the Netherlands, thus placing *Indië* in novel and invigorating discursive contexts.

Indies Literature—An Empty Chest

The multi-layered interactions between people in the Netherlands and the Indies—or perhaps it is more effective to speak of the colonial situation—have had a great impact on daily life as well as on scholarship and science in both parts of the Kingdom, as if the actors and their respective countries were each other's shadows, albeit not always in immediately visible forms. Since the Indies turned into Indonesia, however, the descriptions of those very interactions have taken on ever more one-sided forms in the discussions among Dutch intellectuals and academicians, as well as in their writings. In their apparent efforts to create a communal memory of the Dutch nation, they have turned their back on the ruled and their progeny and have been unwilling to make sense of the colonial situation that, as a result, has been sliding away into amnesia, as if by tacit agreement replaced by imaginary notions of *Indorock*, *rijsttafel*, batik shorts, and paintings of volcanoes. *Indië* and the Indies is hovering over Dutch literature, over Dutch discourse in general like an alternative reality, like a shadow—and hardly anyone seems to notice it.

In particular historians, including literary historians, have promulgated an illusion by expanding the documentation of Dutch excellence in the Indies, an activity that could be described as a reverse form of political correctness: they are writing the *recto* pages of Indies history, ignoring the *verso* pages and, hence, evading the numerous conflicts and tensions between the pages and avoiding the thorny issues in which the rulers played a reprehensible role. "The Dutch have taken themselves on a ride with respect to their past, and the historians pretend to wash their hands with innocence."⁵⁶ And those who refused to ignore the tensions and interactions and tried, instead, to explore further the colonial situation have been called outsiders and moral crusaders, if not soreheads and traitors. Labeled uninteresting and irrelevant, reflections on the colonial situation have become anathema. Instead, the myopic glorification of Dutch achievements, usually worded in the voice of irony and nostalgia, has become the prevalent register in writing about the Indies and Indonesia.

From interaction to amnesia: one could say that the appreciation of so-called Indies literature has followed this same course. When *Indië* began to be a common word towards 1900, novels that were located in the colonial situation were treated as an inherent part of Dutch literature; they were read in the Netherlands and were

⁵⁶ The quotation ("De Nederlanders belazeren zichzelf over hun verleden en de historici wassen hun handen in onschuld") and the images are taken from Rudy Kousbroek's published interview with Remco Meijer, in *Oostindisch doof*, pp. 191-203. In a different context, the historian Vincent Houben summarized the silence about the colonial situation along similar lines in his essay, "A Torn Soul: The Dutch Public Discussion on the Colonial Past in 1995, *Indonesia* 63 (April 1997): 47-66. "Questions asking how the public should perceive the Dutch role in Indonesia and how this perception should affect Dutch commemorations of historical events remained unanswered. The issues having to do with the morality of colonialism and historical awareness of one's own colonial past were more or less silenced by the generation that experienced the conflict in the 1940s, maybe to sustain the idea that what has been done in the past was 'good' or at least better than what some other nations did."

reviewed in Dutch periodicals by critics who also reviewed Dutch novels that were located in the Netherlands. Perhaps most tellingly, they were categorized and evaluated in the terminology—romantic, naturalistic, realistic—that was used for Dutch novels in general. The introduction, around 1900, of the term *Indische roman* (“Indies novel”) in the literary conversations initiated a process of mutual exclusion, of isolation. Around the time of the Japanese invasion and after, this led to the du Perronian idea of Indies literature as a distinct group of texts; this development was concurrent with the shift in attention in the Netherlands, as the Dutch turned away from the colonial situation. Indies literature was made to act like a “minor literature”: as a group of texts constructed by a minority within a major language, in which every element is assumed to have a political intention and which together take on a collective value.⁵⁷

Culturally, this isolation of Indies literature was implemented by two complementary forces. On the one hand, Dutch critics have tended to ignore the Indies; focusing on the Netherlands, they made *Indië* a place of the exotic outsider whose voice could easily be ignored. Operating from the opposite direction, some critics have explicitly glorified the specific characteristics of Indies literature, making *Indië* the place of the different outsider whose voice was only heard within certain circles. With its authors writing and speaking outside the realm defined by the canon builders and historians, Indies literature came to be the place of outsiders.

Some works are rejected and later incorporated, other works are first incorporated and then rejected: a canon is always under construction, and the same holds for literary historiography. In this movement, one thing has been made clear: the works of Dermout, Haasse, and Alberts, but also, in a retroactive movement, of Walraven, Szekely-Lulofs, and van Zeggelen, were not considered strong enough to be incorporated in the Dutch canon or in Dutch literary history, for that matter.⁵⁸ They are written in Dutch, explore the literary conventions and devices that are used by other Dutch authors, and are widely read and highly appreciated—and yet they do not belong. Haasse should be praised for bringing this issue back into focus again.

Concurrent with prevailing tendencies in Netherlands’ literary life and education, which focus on questions of form and appreciation rather than on authors and their intentions (literary work has become a thing rather than a tool, to be appreciated for its self-contained elegance and its capacity to evoke a world against the background of other texts, rather than to be used for making sense of the world), it seems appropriate to read *Sleuteloog* primarily as a loose series of comments on Indies literature. Haasse’s novel summarizes the conventional descriptions of daily life in the Indies, that is, of the servants, the obsession with race, the garden parties, the lust, the gloss and the green. But *Sleuteloog* does more than just that. By employing techniques that complicate the

⁵⁷ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s essay on minor literature in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature* 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁵⁸ Dutch notions of canon and literary history are meant either to resist nationalism or to homogenize it, but no matter which effect they have, they largely ignore Indies writers. See for instance Ton Anbeek’s authoritative *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur tussen 1885 en 1985* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1990), and G. J. van Bork and N. Laan, eds., *Twee eeuwen literatuurgeschiedenis* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1986). See also much-used textbooks such as H. J. M. F. Lodewick et al., *Ik probeer mijn pen* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1979).

narrative in a recognizably “literary” manner, the book also invites us to relieve Indies literature of its isolation. The author accomplishes this by embedding these parody-like sketches of the colonial situation in tales of Indonesia—Warner allegedly visits the archipelago more than once in search of a meaning of the past—and in evocations of life in the Netherlands, where Warner (alias Haasse) continues her search of the past, which appears to be as different, elusive, and unknown as ever. Her experiences of the colonial situation are created against the background of life in the Netherlands, in the Dutch language; that is, *Sleuteloog* seems to indicate what, in retrospect, all so-called Indies writers before her did. And that is what every Dutch writer before and after her does. In this relocation of evocations of life in the Indies, even the gloss and green of Java has become an elegant image rather than a machine of writing, to play with another Deleuzian term, next to the smell of grass, rainy polders, gray backrooms in the inner city, and grim church hymns, interchangeable images in every effort to make sense of Dutch literature.

The chest of Indies literature can soon be closed, Praamstra and other literary historians have laconically claimed, because the last person who personally experienced the Indies is bound to disappear before long. For them, that closure may be the signal that it is time to look back and make their dream come true: that they can now organize so-called Indies authors, their experiences and their so-called Indies literature, in a stable order, once and for all. The moment of that very same closure could, however, also be an ultimate invitation to follow the example of Hella Haasse, alias Helma Warner, and place the chest full of evocations of the Indies in the middle of Dutch writing, open it up with the key newly found—and discover once and for all that the chest is empty and that its contents have already found a place elsewhere in Dutch discourse. Everything is different from what it seems. There is no Indies literature.

Indië is still engaging Dutch readers as a major and prominent protagonist in Dutch writing. It is “branded on their lives, like a seal, like a sign.” And Indies literature, those Dutch texts on the colonial situation, which is still an expression of the effort to escape from the green and gloss of Java, may be “ever more tormenting.” It should continue to haunt Dutch conversations. *Max Havelaar*, for instance. And *De Stille kracht*, *Nummer Elf*, *De Tienduizend Dingen*, *Rood Paleis*. En *Oeroeg*. En *Sleuteloog*.