

## The bear and the orchids. Life and works of E.M. Beekman, authority on Dutch colonial literature

*Ton Broos*

Last year it so happened that two widows of scholars of Dutch asked me if I was interested in a free copy of the complete *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT, 'Dictionary of the Dutch Language'), the largest dictionary in the world (although this is a pre-internet observation).<sup>1</sup> It is a sign of the times that I wasn't enthusiastic, mainly because it is available on-line, and who wants 43 volumes of printed material? Even libraries don't show interest as they point at their lack of space. However, I got to reading the introduction to the WNT, and the initial editor Matthijs de Vries writes in 1882: "*Maar by ons, vrije Nederlanders, hoekiger en kantiger van natuur, met scherper getekende individualiteit, en boven alles gesteld op onbelemmerde uiting van eigen kracht.*" ('But among us, free Netherlanders, of a more awkward and angular nature, with sharper drawn individuality, and above all fond of an unlimited expression of our own strength.')

(De Vries & Te Winkel 1864-2001, lxxvii).

This powerful characterization matches perfectly one of the owners of the WNT, and I am referring to: Eric Montague Beekman (1939-2008), Monty for his friends. He was a colleague who taught Dutch at the University of Massachusetts, although teaching was not his first priority. It would keep him from his own research and creative writing, which comprised of novels and poetry, many translations from Dutch, and scholarly interpretations of international literature. Monty Beekman was one of those rare animals who combined a bearish attitude and posture with an elegant and light dance step, a combination of heavy lifting with feather light down dwindling. Trying to describe the many facets of Monty's research and his importance for Dutch literature is like trying to put a pair of pants on an octopus. Those of us who were teaching Dutch literature in the English-speaking world gratefully used his interpretations of Paul van Ostayen, Simon Vestdijk, or his selection of Multatuli's aphorisms with extensive introductions. He

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017.

gave a presentation to CAANS in 1987 called “On the centennial of Multatuli’s Death.” Not many people know that he also translated stories from modern Dutch literature, because they were unpublished samples of works by writers in residence, done for the Translation Foundation in the 1980s and 1990s. “Translation is such a marvelous no man’s land. I feel generous toward the unknown slob who has wrung beauty from an obscure language [...] I fancy myself creative while translating one medium of speech into another; it requires skill, knowledge, and sensitivity” (Beekman 1971, 23).

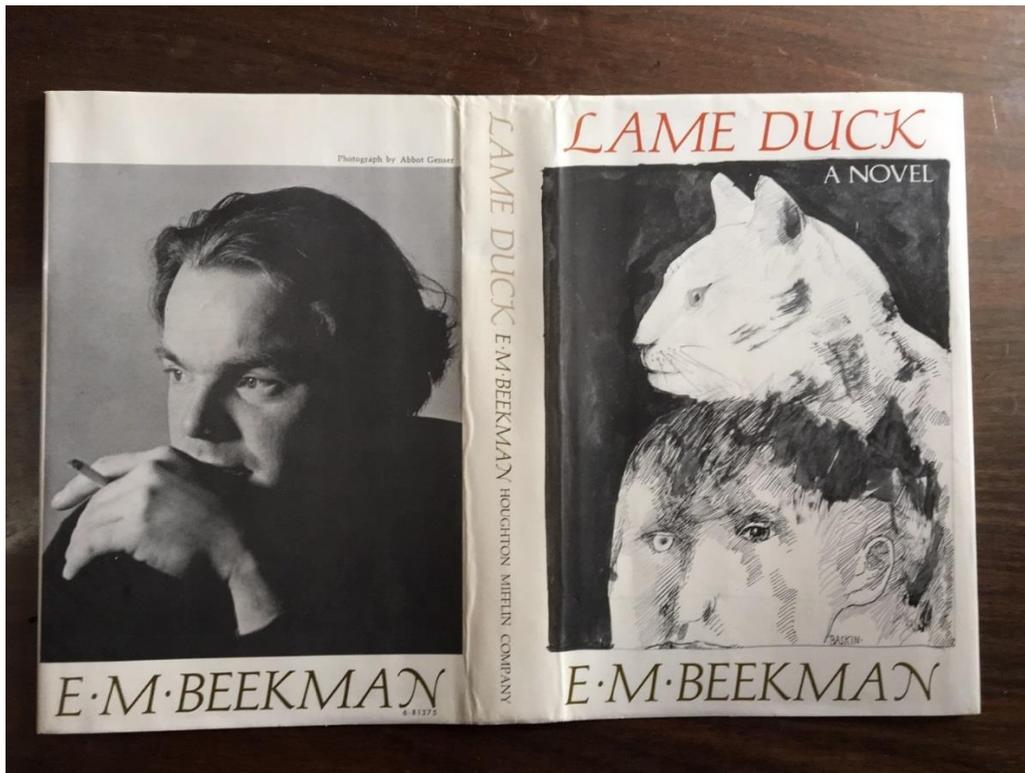


Figure 1. Front cover of *Lame duck*. A novel by E.M. Beekman.

Because of his translations and his editorial work in the series *Library of the Indies*, Monty became world famous. Dutch Indies literature would have stayed hidden in the caves of forgotten texts, the faded portraits of *tempo doeloe* or times past, if it was not for Monty’s persistence and dedication, so well expressed in the title of his study *Troubled pleasures*.

Fame was not in the stars if you look at his childhood. You don’t know what parental cruelty, childhood abandonment and mental anguish is until you have read the description that Monty made of Simon Klemman, his alter ego in his autobiographical works *Frozen years* (Beekman 1993) and *Mastering silence*

(Beekman n.d.). Young Simon is left in a boarding school in the Netherlands during World War II, not unlike Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, complete with corporal punishment and porridge for breakfast. His subsequent years in Indonesia are of a similar mental torment, now inflicted by his alcoholic abusive father. It is perplexing that Monty even spent one minute of his time on the country that brought so many cruel memories. But then, as he later writes, one should not remain despondent but turn defiant. That must have inspired him also in his interest in the works of Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, the German born naturalist who worked for the VOC, the Dutch East India company, on Ambon, and was the author of two masterpieces on tropical plants, shells and animals. Monty translated *The Ambonese curiosity cabinet* (Beekman 1999) and the *Ambonese herbal* (Beekman 2011) in six hefty volumes, originally published in Dutch in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As I mentioned before, Monty Beekman was born in The Netherlands in 1939, in a dysfunctional family that forced him to stay in a boarding school during the war. After an escape, he roamed the streets for months, living off food he stole from farms. His parents eventually took him out of the Reformatory Institution in 1945 and his father accepted a position as a mining engineer, moving the family to the Dutch colonies in South East Asia.

Life in the Dutch East Indies with an abusive father made for horrendous stories; I quote from Monty (n.d.)'s unpublished manuscript to illustrate this:

He [the father] got up, moved swiftly around the table, grabbed Simon by the neck, swung him around, and slammed him against the door. "You will do what I tell you, you idiot, even when I haven't said anything. Damn it, you are always around, always where you are not wanted." And when he slammed the boy for the third time he missed the door and Simon's head smashed against the doorjamb. A big gash over his left eye spurted blood and flowed down his face, matting his thick, sun-bleached eyebrow. The man whirled him around and snapped, "Stand at attention when I talk to you!" and the boy did so without making a sound, staring straight ahead, blood blinding his left eye, the same one that had been injured at St. Joseph's. Physical pain was easier to handle than the constant verbal abuse, because then Simon could reach back to the war years and the Vangray Reformatory, and press a reserve of will power into service that could make him almost impervious. (Unpublished ms., n.d., 61)

His autobiographical memoir ends with his repatriation to Holland. It was not surprising that Monty Beekman fled the family and came to the United States as a teenager in 1957. One of his later works has a publisher's blurb, and reveals, probably in his own words:

After a brief stint in the U.S. Army, he kept himself alive with a variety of jobs (oilman on the Rock Island Railroad, bartender, plastics factory worker, janitor, bouncer, lab assistant) before earning his B.A. in English and Comparative literature from the University of California at Berkeley in 1963 and his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in 1968. He has taught for more than three decades in the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and is the author of more than two dozen books including novels, short stories, scholarly works and poetry. (Beekman 2003, 97-98)

Part of his studies was doing research as a Fulbright Fellow in 1965-66 in Belgium, which resulted in his *Homeopathy of the absurd: The grotesque in Paul van Ostaïjen's creative prose* (Beekman 1970). An example of his expertise in comparative literature can be found in his *The verbal empires of Simon Vestdijk and James Joyce*, published in 1983. Although Vestdijk has almost disappeared from the Dutch literary consciousness, *Meneer Visser's hellevaart* ('Mr. Visser's small inferno') of 1936 still enjoys a certain popularity, and Beekman makes comparisons with parts in Joyce's *Ulysses*. We also read about Vestdijk's *Else Böhler* (1935) and his *Ivoren wachters* ('Ivory Guards', 1951), which refers to the protagonist's teeth. In an appendix, Beekman lists Dutch words and expressions that contributed to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (Beekman 1983, 200-209).

His greatest triumph at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst must have been a named professorship as Multatuli-professor, which he deserved as the grandmaster behind his series *Library of the Indies*, translations of Dutch colonial literary works into English, in as many as 12 different editions. They vary from Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, A. Alberts' *The islands*, Louis Couperus' *The hidden force*, Rob Nieuwenhuis' *Faded portraits* (a personal friend of Beekman and published under his pseudonym E. Breton de Nijs), to Maria Dermoût's *The ten thousand things* or Van Schendel's *Jan Company*. Over time, Monty became an authority on Indies Literature and the logical sequence was his *Troubled pleasures: Dutch colonial literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950* (Beekman 1996). This work, more than 600 pages long, does not pretend to be a complete, inclusive history of Dutch colonial literature, but shows an extensive depth and provocative knowledge of this literature. He definitely tries to raise its profile as he compares it to American literary examples.

The selection of works discussed was his choice and therefore prone to criticism. Gerard Termorshuizen writes for instance: "Beekman is not exactly a master of knowing when to stop. As far as I am concerned, he should dispense his enormous knowledge in smaller doses. Caught up in his strongly associative stream of thought, the structure of his scholarly argument suffers as a result" (Termorshuizen 1998, 512). The reviewer here refers to Beekman's dealing with

P.A. Daum, comparing his writing to the literature of the Old South of the United States. Bert Paasman complains in his review in NRC newspaper that he has to study literature first before he can read Beekman (Paasman 1998, 37). It shows the narrower path of thinking that one sees in Dutch critics, always weary about scholars writing in a non-Dutch language, whereas Beekman wants to widen the horizon of Dutch literature and create a greater seat for Dutch in general in the literary theater of the world.

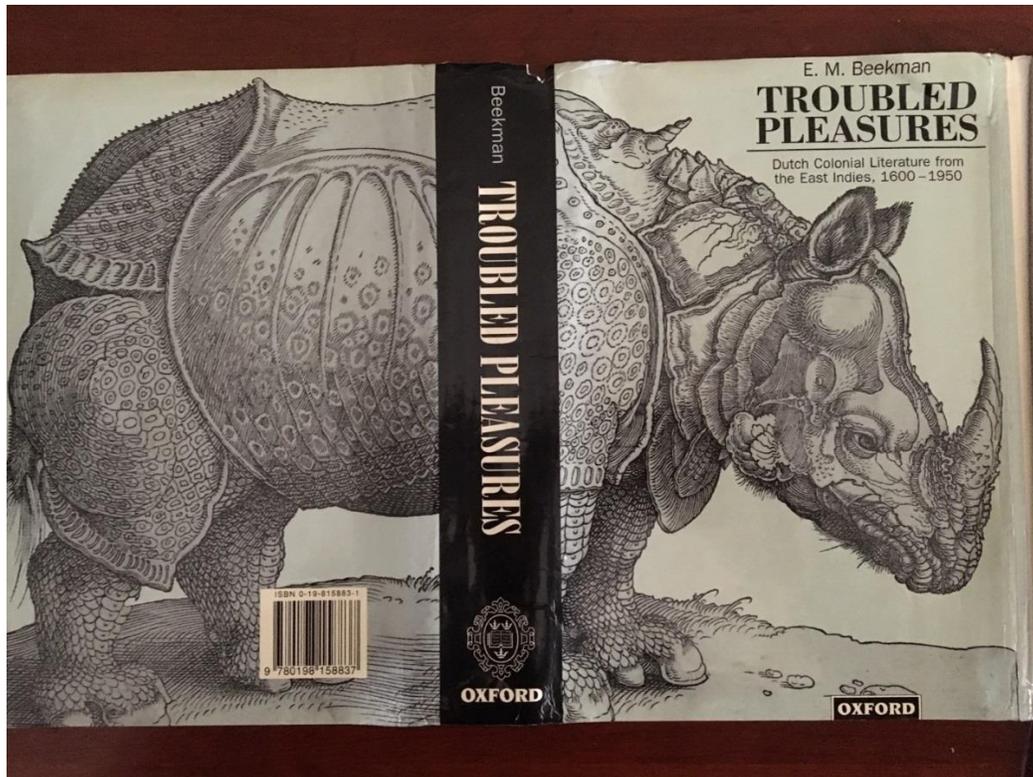


Figure 2. Front cover of *Troubled pleasures*. Dutch colonial literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950 by E.M. Beekman.

In a few letters that Monty sent to me, you can smell some of his temperament, often caused by books in the making. Listen to him in 1995: “I am waiting. Waiting to find out about the grants, about my *Indisch* book, about the fate of 2 manuscripts of mine at New Directions. I feel like a giant case of constipation. But negative diarrhea I don’t want either!” He signs the letter with “*semper idem*” and he must often have thought that it was all the same when it took so much time to get his work funded and published.

When he enjoyed a sabbatical in 1996, he wrote from Leiden: “Leiden is a nice place but everything is so goddamn small and narrow and crammed in this

country. Faith [his wife] and I now live in a one-room apartment where the beds are up under the rafters and only accessible by ladder!”

Fortunately, it did not stop him from his work, as he writes:

I am slowly getting the research done and might even start writing the introduction. I have been forced to find out the craziest things and would you believe this [in his proud excitement he starts writing in Dutch]: *5 woorden die ik absoluut niet thuis kon brengen kunnen ook niet door het Lexicologisch Instituut gevonden worden! Als Beekman het niet weet, weet niemand het! Ja jonge, zo zit dat.* (‘5 words that I absolutely could not identify could not be found by the Lexicological Institute either. If Beekman doesn’t know, nobody knows! Yes, my boy, that’s the way it is.’)

He was referring to his masterpiece, Rumphius’ voluminous works, for which there is not enough praise in the past, present and surely in the future.

The story of Rumphius’ life and works is worth mentioning. Georgius Everhardus Rumphius was born in Germany, but joined the Dutch East India Company first as a soldier, later as a merchant and as a judge, in Amboina, the Moluccas, now part of Indonesia. His enormous interest in his surroundings made him start descriptions of the natural world for which there was great interest. His natural and botanical observations made for his nickname: “the Pliny of the Indies”, but he was also called “the blind seer.” The reason for this is that he lost his sight in 1670 at age 42; Beekman claims it was glaucoma. More disasters fell on him as he lost his wife and daughter four years later in an earthquake. On top of this, his manuscript with illustrations was destroyed in a fire in 1687. To recreate his work he had support from officials, colleagues and his son, besides his formidable memory and creative imagination. The first six books of the Herbal were shipped five years later to Holland for publication, but the ship sank after a French attack. Fortunately, a copy had been made, which he amended until three months before his death in 1702 at the age of 74. Both titles were published posthumously in 1705 and 1741.

Beekman set out to translate all of Rumphius’ works into English. In 1982, a reviewer of *The poison tree*, a publication that gave a foretaste of Rumphius’ oeuvre with quotes, said it thus:

Beekman deserves great credit for rendering Rumphius’s prose so magnificently and, in the process, focusing attention on him as a Dutch stylist of note. As evidence, it is worth quoting a single example of the translation, Rumphius’s description of the high mountains of Ambon, the harsh environment of *Muscus Capilaris*: “There no voice is ever heard, neither those of men nor those of beasts, nor even birds, whereas all animals eschew these cold and rough pinnacles of the world. And an eternal

silence, a ghastly twilight, and a whisper of winds reigns there, nor should one speak loudly but cross these mountains in patient stillness, for a loud crying will stir the air to rain.” (Fox 1984, 366)

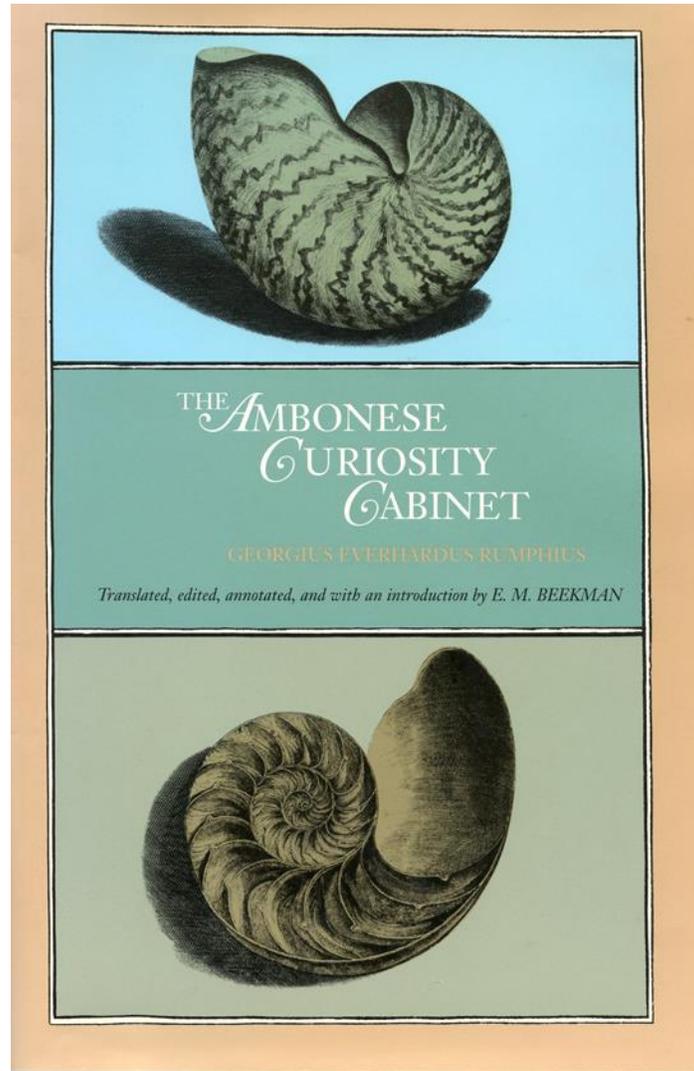


Figure 3. Front cover of *The Ambonese curiosity cabinet* by Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, translated, edited, annotated and with an introduction by E.M. Beekman.

I invited him to Ann Arbor where he delivered the 4<sup>th</sup> DeVries VanderKooy annual memorial lecture in 1999. It was a remarkable talk because he introduced things uncommon to us in the spirit of Rumphius, and comparing this with the beautiful interpretation that Maria Dermoût gave us in her novel *The Ten Thousand Things* (1955). This novel describes the life of an elderly lady called Felicia who lives in harmony with the ten thousand things that form creation and include death in

different manifestations. It was a bestseller in its American translation. Monty pointed out the parts that she used from Rumphius' work and put it in a new light. I quote from the book that was published after the lecture:

What he [Rumphius] teaches is that we should see beauty even if one's life is a disaster, even if malignity rears up and strikes. In other words, we should try to transcend the now, overcome the constrictions that society and the human condition have forced upon our souls. Life is always difficult, but one should be able to warm one's soul in the glow of beauty. [...] Wisdom is not only in the heart but also in the object. It requires listening. We should listen to nature as Rumphius did. It is a gift, because it is free, gratis, for nothing. It will restore us and it can provide solace. And that is why it is magic. (Beekman 2003, 41-43)

He was at the time working on *The Ambonese herbal* which found its final publication shortly after his death in 2008. The book has five volumes plus an extensive index and describes in remarkable detail more than 2,000 plants, their habitats, and their economic and medicinal uses. Its 800 original illustrations are a treasure trove for botanists, anthropologists, historians, etc. As he had pointed out in an article on Junghuhn, he recognized that scientific documents were literary texts as well, verbal messages that tried to persuade; persuasion employs rhetoric and rhetoric is style (Beekman 1991).

I do not know how he found time to research another writer's literary work, but perhaps it was no coincidence that he published a work called *The crippled heart* (1997), an introduction to the life, times and works of Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch. Not only does this writer's name sound funny in English, but like his biographer, he was also a gifted individualist who refused to fall in line. Focquenbroch was born in Amsterdam in 1640, obtained his medical degree in 1662 and went to West Africa to make his fortune as a colonial official. He died soon in Elmina, Africa's Gold Coast in 1670. In 1997, Beekman's publication did not reveal much new information about the Dutch author's life, but his translation of four long annotated letters from Africa, together with a lengthy introduction, gave a unique new insight into this region from this early period, for the first time in English (Beekman 1997; Broos 2017).

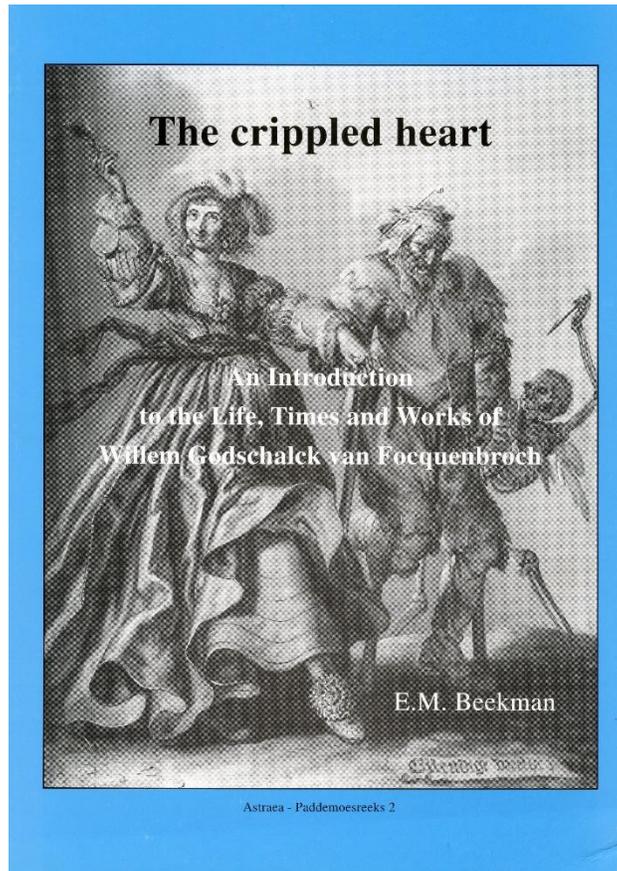


Figure 4. Front cover of *The crippled heart*. An introduction to the life, times and works of Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch by E.M. Beekman.

Besides editing other people's work, he was a writer of fiction in his own right. First there was *Lame duck*, published in 1971, describing the life of Hugo Lenz, a cripple, a loner, who makes his living by doing translations. In the novel he describes himself as a "writer (of sorts). Has a small legacy which will allow him to be always respectably poor" and "insecure, loner, lives like an erratic boulder unnoticed except by his own smell" (Beekman 1971, 233). He wards off his demons and loneliness with pills and Dutch gin in the company of friends, a publisher Latro who commissions him to turn out pornography, a Shakespeare scholar called Scop and a beer salesman called Feld, not forgetting a brief stint of a love relation with Nadine. This all plays in Paris and mainly Amsterdam with a leading role for his cat Asmodee, who takes his master flying through Dutch heaven as he is shot out of the sky.

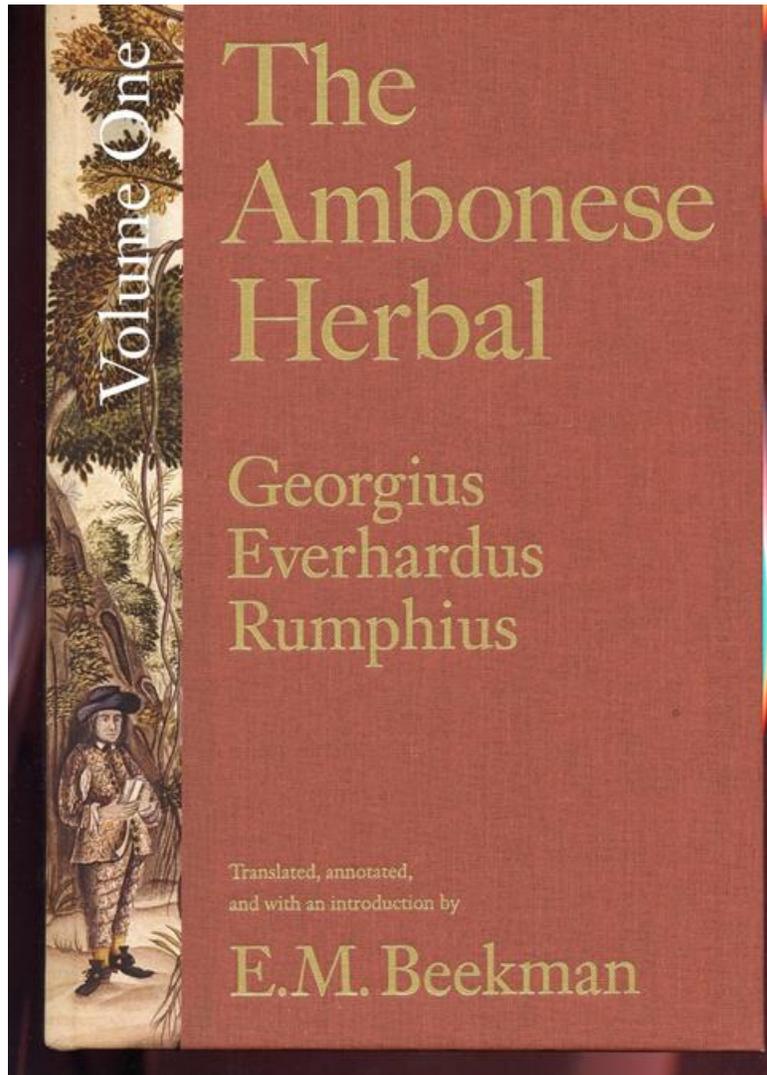


Figure 5. Front cover of Volume I of The Ambonese herbal by Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, translated, annotated and with an introduction by E.M. Beekman.

After *Lame duck*, he wrote *The killing jar* in 1976. It deals with an American novelist called Toivo Syystalvi (the blurb misspells Sysstalvi), author of a successful novel *Past reason hunted*, who is invited to go on a lecture tour to France, Holland, and England. In Amsterdam he meets a philosopher who is murdered, followed by assassins trying to kill him. He is thrown back into the world of his father, Kall, who disappeared during WWII, fighting among his fellow Finns. A CIA agent Blaise Donner and another spook called Happy Higgins are also deeply involved as our hero finally is dealing with his three rivals. Hilarious pages deal with his secret stay with the circus and performances as a clown; also noteworthy is the way he blusters into the American embassy, where he demands the services of the

available call girl in the basement, which he calls “the relief station” (Beekman 1976, 186). The storyline is somewhat contrived for my taste and there is a tendency of exaggerated usage of obscure words, which must be the result of a translator, writer, literary wordsmith, who frequents reference works forcing readers to use the alphabet more than necessarily. I have a slight suspicion that he wants to show off his extraordinary command of English as a second language learner, which makes sometimes for unnecessary slowdowns in pace and rhythm.

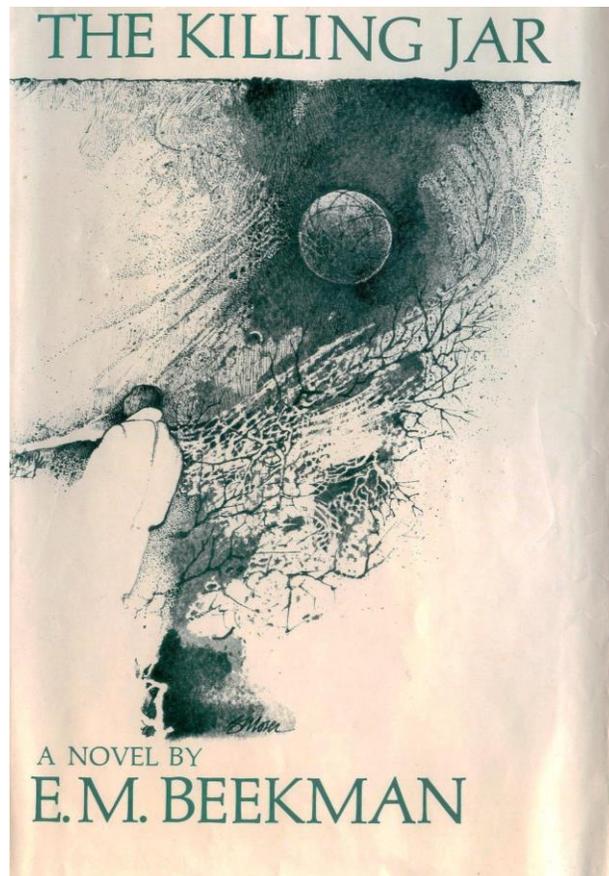


Figure 6. Front cover of *The killing jar* by E.M. Beekman.

Another part of Monty’s literary life was his poetic talent. He described it as follows: “I had other presumptions once, but after a certain age and the cold logic of bereavements, life does indeed seem a lesson in leaving and poetry a better grade of litter” (Beekman 2003, ix). The title of his collected poems is therefore *The litter of leaving: Collected poems*, published in 2003. Beekman’s poetry has been described as “acerbic, disturbing, earthy, and bizarrely comic” (Beekman 2003, cover text). In contrast, his poems also reflect his search for beauty and peace in an unsettled, often cruel and disappointing world. Beekman regards

nature as the ultimate solace, “the one that gives and the one that taketh away” (Beekman 2003, ix). In his final chapter, “Nature (Solace)”, Beekman presents a lovely and tranquil series of short poems that stand in sharp contrast to his sardonic accounts of failed relationships, personal terrors, ludicrous contemporary culture, and the disappointments of academic life. Beekman’s intellectually sensuous poetry reflects a lifetime love affair with language.

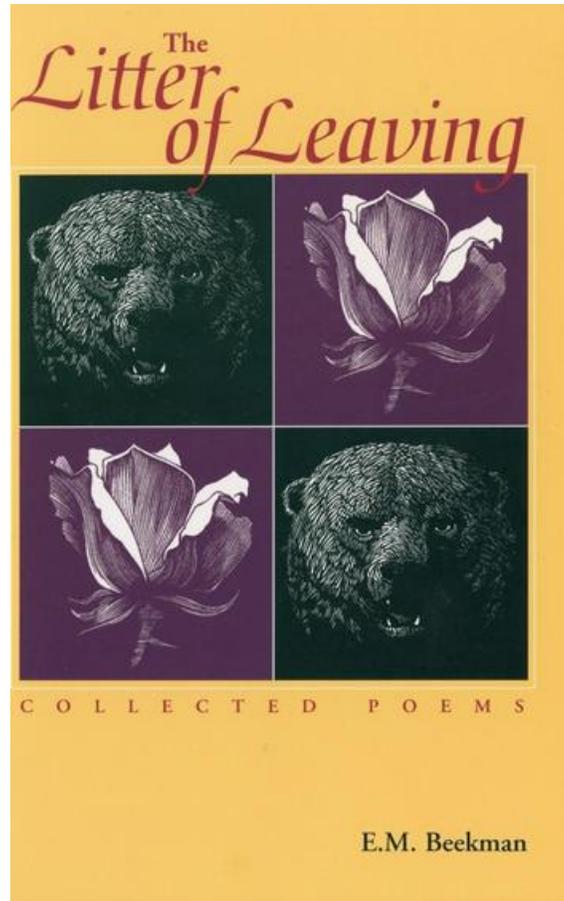


Figure 7. Front cover of *The Litter of Leaving: Collected Poems* by E.M. Beekman.

So, is there a conclusion? We should be grateful for Eric Montague Beekman who was an important personality of the international Dutch literary landscape. He was the promotor of Dutch colonial literature, the *trait d'union* between two languages, but also his own *persona literata* as novelist and poet. Most of his life he lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, around the corner from Emily Dickinson’s

home. She gets this dedication in Monty Beekman's publication of 2003 *Rumphius' Orchids*: "To him who keeps an Orchis' heart / The swamps are pink in June."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This quote from Emily Dickinson contains an error. The original reads: "with June".

