

Book Review

Johanna C. Prins, Bettina Brandt, Timothy Stevens and Thomas F. Shannon, eds.: *The Low Countries and the New World(s): Travel, Discovery, Early Relations*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000. PAANS 13. xvii + 226p.

The nineteen articles in this volume have been developed from papers read at the International Conference on Netherlandic Studies held in New York in 1996; eleven of them indeed are about the new world(s) of the title. After the opening address to the conference, they are arranged in alphabetical order by author, but I will discuss them grouped by topic, taking first the eight concerned solely with the Low Countries.

Frits van Oostrom (Leiden) opened the conference with an address in which he urged scholarly study of what Dutch literary history reveals about the national character. This 19th-century concept, now regarded as vague and dangerous - we have seen the harm European nationalism can do - nonetheless seems to him valid: he detects qualities of seriousness and moralizing even in the earliest Dutch literature, in the 13th century. *Van den Vos Reynaerde* and *Max Havelaar* are the great Dutch works of genius precisely because they escape from this straitjacket. There is certainly moralizing in the work written in 1714 and described by Andrew Fix (Lafayette College), which one might suppose typical of the Reformed clergy's attacks at that time on Cartesian philosophy for allegedly causing the spread of atheism. However, its author, Hermanus Witsius, cites philosophers to prove the immortality of the soul, and blames atheism on "superstition"

(i.e. Catholicism) and the quarrels of Protestant sects. Discussing the same period, Marybeth Carlson (Dayton) traces the history of poor relief in Rotterdam in the 17th and 18th centuries. As far as possible the city left it up to the churches to provide it, topping up their funds as needed. As the economy declined there was never enough money for this charitable work, and attempts were made to disqualify people who had come from other places or who led disorderly or immoral lives - but finding people to disqualify involved hiring more inspectors. Some things never change.

Two articles about the 20th century revisit the complex question of modernism vs. postmodernism.¹ Thomas Vaessens (Utrecht) uses van Ostaijen's poem "Asta Nielsen," about a movie actress, to argue that the Modern poets shared the Romantics' need to resist rationalized Christianity, moralism and a mechanized world by drawing on older beliefs. By rejecting all certainties, the poet feels open to new opportunities; he lives in the laws of art in order to "colonize his own personal future." (193) Bertram Mourits, also from Utrecht, opens his discussion of J. Bernlef by defining modernism quite differently, as "related to notions of order, intellectualism, consciousness and a belief in progress" and leading to "estrangement, alienation and confidence in technology taken to the extreme." On this showing, postmodernism is a democratic reaction to modernism and lets any form of culture inspire the poet. Bernlef aspired to write poetry like jazz: musical, part of popular culture, and leaving a place for improvisation.

Johan Snapper (Berkeley) traces the development of Etty Hillesum as a writer. It

is perhaps the forgotten thread in the life of this pursuer of a personal relationship with God who moved into the reality of Westerbork and on to the Hell of Auschwitz. The Liberation was a vast relief, but it did not always go smoothly. Oscar E. Lanson (Univ. of North Carolina, Charlotte) explains how the Americans drove the Dutch in the Maastricht area to demonstrations and strikes in 1945: their offensive stalled, so a large contingent of soldiers stayed there for months; supplies ran low; the authorities sent in with them by the Dutch government were incompetent and resented by the existing civil authorities and the Resistance fighters (whom the Americans mistrusted). Above all, the Dutch longed to return to a normal life and run their own country. In the most contemporary article, Robert S. Kirsner (UCLA) and Vincent J. van Heuven (Leiden) report on an experiment in which native Dutch speakers evaluated a series of sentences marked by different final particles (*hè, hoor* etc.) and intonation patterns. They detected a difference of connotation especially where the final pitch (boundary tone) was raised.

Turning to the new world(s), and beginning with North America, Anthony F. Buccini (Chicago) argues that the Dutch of New Netherland, contrary to what even its speakers came to believe, was no creole but the Dutch spoken in a region between Utrecht and Amsterdam, consciously preserved. Other languages had little effect on it, partly because the Indians devised a pidgin based on Algonquian for the Dutch to use in trading with them; the Dutch thought they were learning an actual Indian language. One such trader, who prospered, was Cornelis Steenwyck; John S. Hallam (Pacific Lutheran Univ.) shows how his

portrait draws on mapmaking conventions of the time to heighten his figure as the great colonizer. Olf Praamstra (Leiden) contrasts two 19th-century images of America. E.J. Potgieter hails it as the new society, egalitarian as the Netherlands had been in the 17th century and needed to become again. Conrad Busken Huet disagreed with his mentor: the Americans slaughtered the Indian in the name of Western civilization - which (in the sense of respect for the arts) they did not have. Neither man visited the United States, but between them they sum up the ambivalent reactions of those who did.

J. van Donselaar (Bilthoven) has found a different colonial language development from Buccini: in the 17th century already, "[i]n ... the Dutch colonies in South America, the vocabulary of the colonists began to deviate from the ... standard language." (49) The article concentrates on names of flora and fauna unknown back home, whose names they often borrowed. This view in turn somewhat contradicts the statement with which Willem Burger (Rands Afrikaans Univ.) begins his article: "The first thing any discoverer does is to give names to everything he discovers. Naming opposes chaos" (29) - it imposes your version of history. André Brink, in *Inteendeel* (1993; *On the contrary*, 1994), a historical novel that dissolves into fantasy, refuses this reduction, exemplifying the preferable co-existence of many versions of history. This novel is also discussed in the article by Luc Renders (Limburgs UC), who shows us the evolving picture of colonialism drawn by Afrikaans writers from the 1960s onwards, from Eurocentric stories of heroes from which the Africans are absent, to *Inteendeel* where the white character ends up

begging them for forgiveness. The fantastic and self-contradictory elements in that novel, Renders reads as asserting that "the storyteller's interpretation of reality is much more accurate and believable than the historian's." (176)

Certainly Johannes Witte of Hese, perhaps the first Dutch writer of a travel account (about 1400), was believed at the time. He claimed to have spent a long time at the court of Prester John and to have sailed past Eden and Purgatory. Scott D. Westrem (CUNY) has edited Witte's *Itinerarius* and here discusses it. When the Dutch really travelled to the East it was for trade, especially in spices and more especially in pepper. Julie Berger Hochstrasser (Iowa) points out the presence of pepper in many 17th-century Dutch still-lives, often shown with the food (melons, oysters) that doctors recommended serving it with. She concludes that these paintings, so far from warning the viewer against over-indulgence, celebrate Dutch worldwide economic domination - and say nothing about the cost of this success: two-thirds of the sailors on those expeditions died (which represents one-fifth of the young male Dutch population), while the inhabitants of the Indies were decimated.

Inevitably we find in this volume Edward Said's term Orientalism, i.e. the tendency of Western colonizers to "explain" the East in terms which justify the act of colonizing it. Louise Viljoen (Stellenbosch) writes about the journey to the East Indies in 1912 of the South African doctor and writer C. Louis Leipoldt. In his reading to prepare for this voyage he certainly absorbed the Orientalist viewpoint, but he proved receptive to the reality of life there, so much so that his travel account hints at ideas his Afrikaner

readers would not have tolerated if spelled out: he favours mixed marriages and opposes segregation. This ambivalence may come from belonging to a people both colonized and colonizers. Katherine Ebel (Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison) examines whether Slauerhoff's novel *Het verboden rijk* (1932) is an "Orientalist" work. It is an historical fiction featuring Luis de Camoens, the 16th-century Portuguese author of an epic poem about exploration of the East called *Os Lusíades*, but Slauerhoff presents an unreal story of two people in Macao who merge into one and who never really experience China; he is/they are alone. The tale is designed to make no claim to Orientalist knowledge.

Orientalism is also absent from the work of F. Springer, which is more sober. W.F. Jonckheere (Natal) sees the scenes in Springer's novels, whether or not set in the East Indies (where Springer was born), merely as knots tying together plots made of meetings and separations. Springer writes to distract himself from a senseless world. Perhaps we live in postmodern times, but it occurs to me that having the whole world as a half-ignored backdrop, being able to travel anywhere (if we have enough money), may also be a form of colonial activity, and so perhaps is the "negotiation" of "free trade" agreements. What future writers will make of our world, and what future scholars will make of those writers, we shall see.

BASIL D. KINGSTONE
University of Windsor.

¹ Cf. my review of *Vantage points, Festschrift for Johan P. Snapper* (1996) in *CJNS* XVIII, i, p.66.