The Character of Professor McNeil in Maria Dermoût's *The Ten Thousand Things.*

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The principal story in Maria Dermoût's *The Ten Thousand Things*[1] is perhaps that of "The Professor." It concerns a famous Scots botanist, Professor McNeil, who meets with a violent death on the island of Ambon in the Moluccas. McNeil is very much the sum of a number of historical figures, and the story of his murder is essentially a summary of the island's violent history. Yet, for all its high seriousness, the story also contains elements of an unexpectedly light nature. It is this mixture of the ridiculous and the sublime, of life and death, love and hate, and of forgetting and remembering, that marks the cosmic balance portrayed in *The Ten Thousand Things*.

To an important degree, Dermoût's professor is a reincarnation of the seventeenth century naturalist Rumphius.[2] The person of Rumphius, his works, and his spirit pervade and animate the story of Professor McNeill and his reserved Javanese assistant Suprapto. The professor goes to Ambon in search of the specimens Rumphius described in his herbal. He carries with him Rumphius' *Book of Herbs*, in twelve volumes with all the commentaries and appendices, and his *Book of Curiosities*. Later on when he meets the lady of the Small Garden, they discuss the work of Rumphius together. In keeping with his assumed role as mentor and surrogate father, the professor reads to Suprapto from his favorite Rumphius about the glorious little jellyfish that sail together in great argosies. In so doing, he reveals the delicacy underneath his rather preposterous exterior and ungainly mannerisms. He also foreshadows his own burial at sea. There is talk too, that he might grow blind, the way Rumphius did.

Dermoût also modelled her professor in part on the unfortunate Charles B. Robinson, assistant to the American botanist E.D. Merrill.[3] The latter published his *Interpretation of Rumphius's Herbarium Amboinense* in 1917. Earlier, Merrill had sent Robinson to Ambon. There he was murdered, in a small village south of the city of Ambon on the island of the same name. Combining Merrill's endeavor and Robinson's fate, we see Dermoût giving historical substance to her Professor McNeill.

An additional, earlier source for McNeill is the American naturalist Albert S. Bickmore[4], who came to Ambon in 1860. As E.M. Beekman points out, Bickmore carried around pockets full of shiny coins, which he handed out to children to encourage them to bring him botanical specimens. Bickmore was a genuine admirer of Rumphius, and carried a copy of his *Curiosities* around with him. He also gave us a biographical sketch of Rumphius, and a transcription of his gravestone. We shall come back to this gravestone a little later.

Our fictitious Professor McNeill owes his propensity for turning blind to the historical Rumphius. The latter became blind and could only complete his books with the assistance of his son. However, Dermoût shows us that it is Suprapto, sooner than the professor himself, who is truly afraid that his professor will become blind, because he does not want to get stuck with him: "If he goes blind, would I have to stay with him, like the son of Rumphius who stayed with his blind father and did everything for him, wrote everything down, drew it all anew? (he could write and draw well too) - no, he didn't want that, he didn't have to, they weren't father and

son."[5] In other words, Suprapto is afraid. At this very juncture, he chooses to sever his relationship with McNeill. He denies the man who is almost more than a father to him. This denial goes some way to explain why Suprapto's delicate hand remains empty at the end of the story. The so-called lady of the Small Garden is correct in her assessment of him as "so refined in appearance, so reserved, not to be reached."[6]

That same lady also remembers the professor as "a bit grotesque."[7] We first see Professor McNeill through the eyes of Suprapto, the Javanese aristocrat. Professor McNeill appears to him: "Tall, thin, with clumsy hands and feet...reddish hair...in tufts, bushy eyebrows above glasses with heavy double lenses...a thick nose covered with freckles."[8] In short, outwardly McNeill looks like a caricature, or a cartoon character, or a wayang puppet resembling a buffoon, such as Semar. We are also reminded that the Chinese called the first Dutchmen they saw "Red-haired Barbarians."

By contrast, Suprapto looks like the mythical Prince Arjuna, with his "bent, almost Semitic nose, the hairs of his beard and mustache carefully plucked out...eyebrows, as thin as pencil lines...(in) the fine, light-brown face. His hands and especially his feet were small and strikingly beautiful."[9] His is "a tense refinement of centuries." It seems that the character of Suprapto is modelled in part on the writer Noto Suroto, the Javanese nobleman and the author of *Wayang Songs*.[10] Like Suprapto, Noto Suroto tried in his writings and in his life to bridge the gap between Indonesian and Dutch culture, and he failed.

Dermoût soon develops her story of the professor beyond the initial East-West confrontation between the refined native prince, and the common, clumsy Westerner. The reversal that follows is ironic. Suprapto reveals his prejudice and fears, as well as that of his mother, while the jovial and awkward Westerner reveals himself to be a most thoughtful tutor and friend. The professor speaks well, despite his stutter, he reaches out, despite his damp, clumsy hands, and he braves the forest although he is only armed with a penknife.

When Suprapto and Professor McNeill meet a second time, at the pier in Surabaya, the latter looks even more of a caricature, "wearing a topee of heavy cork, covered with khaki and lined in green. From the back of it a wide cloth hung halfway down his back." . . . "Why isn't he carrying a butterfly net and a vasculum? Suprapto wondered. It didn't surprise him when later he saw such a net and such a box in the professor's cabin."[11] Shortly thereafter, the professor shows him a portrait of his sister Ursel, "with a pince-nez instead of glasses, straight hair combed high, a blouse with a stand-up collar."[12] It is by then quite obvious whom they both resemble, McNeill and Ursel, what Suprapto is thinking when he spots the butterfly net, and what Maria Dermoût barely stops short of telling us, namely that Professor McNeill is modelled also in some measure on both the writer Rodolphe Töpffer and his creation. "Without Ursel I could not travel,"[13] the professor adds, for good measure.

Most people who know Dutch, certainly those of Maria Dermoût's generation, know the following lines of doggerel by heart:

> "Lieve zuster Ursula, ik ga naar Amerika.
> 'k Schrijf U dit met eigen hand.
> 'k Ga naar 't schoon kapellenland,
> Want vlinders vangen in een net
> Is mijn allergrootste pret."[14]

Which translates roughly as:

> "Dearest sister Ursula, I'm off to America.
> I'm writing you, in my own hand,
> I'm off for butterflying-land,
> For catching butterflies in great measure
> Has always been my greatest pleasure."

In the Netherlands, Rodolphe Töpffer's comic-book story called *Monsieur*

Cryptogame (1845) was translated into verse by a man called Goeverneur in 1858, who apparently copied the work from Julius Knell's 1847 German version of Töpffer's work.[15] Töpffer (1799-1848) was originally trained to become a painter, like his father. His failing eyesight and attending fear of blindness forced him to become a teacher. He ran a school in his birthplace, Geneva, Switzerland, but he continued to draw and paint. He produced a number of comic-books, originally inspired by Rowlandson's *Adventures of Doctor Syntax*. Töpffer also wrote an *Essai de Physiognomie*, which he illustrated with caricatures, clearly lampooning the pseudo-science of physiognomy.

Perhaps Dermoût knew Töpffer's essay. There is no doubt she knew Prikkebeen and his sister Ursula, as Goeverneur had translated the story of Monsieur Cryptogame and his sister, of the tall, skinny fellow with his butterfly net leaving his sister behind. She may even have heard of Töpffer's diminished eyesight. There is no doubt that she purposely misleads the reader by first giving her professor an appearance resembling that of Prikkebeen (=skinny legs resembling the needles he uses to mount his catches), and then giving the lie to this physiognomy by endowing him with learning and humanity.

As to McNeill's relationship to butterflies, this association too is explored by Dermoût. The men who kill the professor carry him to the beach, roll him up in an old mat, bound with rattan rope, weight him down, then drop him into the deep bay. There he remains, in his shroud, which for all intents and purposes makes him look like a pupa in a cocoon.

The Dutch word "kapel", as in "kapellenland" above, means butterfly. (It is no longer used, the word used nowadays is "vlinder.") We mentioned earlier that Bickmore transcribed what was on Rumphius' gravestone when he visited Ambon in 1860. Rumphius was not buried in a church, rare in 1702, but, according to his wish, on the outskirts of town under palmtrees. His original gravestone was destroyed by English soldiers during the Raffles regime, who were looking for gold. The monument of which Bickmore copied the inscription had been erected by Baron van der Capellen in 1824, who had come to reclaim the Indies for his government.[16]

The inherent meaning of Van der Capellen's last name, and his restoring Rumphius' gravestone[17] both add to the intent of Dermoût's story. She knew of the early desecration of Rumphius' grave and of Van der Capellen's restoration of it. She must have seen this historical given as a stroke of good luck and an encouragement to incorporate her allusions to lepidoptery. This allusion would, in turn, suggest a higher meaning to her story.

At the end of the story, a Dutch officer informing Suprapto of the professor's murder mentions how a little girl has practically betrayed her fellow-countrymen for one quarter apiece. One of the murderers turns state's evidence. The imputation here seems clear: The little girl betrays the murderers unwittingly, she is innocent, but Suprapto, like Peter denying Jesus, denies his teacher knowingly. Not too much should be made of this, but it does give the story a vaster dimension. The story of Professor McNeill and the clerk Suprapto, the teacher and his disciple, is the story of love extended and not reciprocated. It also becomes the story of resurrection, stressing the cyclical theme of *The Ten Thousand Things*. Professor McNeil will after all have above him the glory of the little jellyfish he came back to seek.

NOTES

[1]Maria Dermoût, *The Ten Thousand Things*, translated by Hans Koning. Afterword by E.M. Beekman (Amherst, 1983).

[2][Rumphius], *The Poison Tree. Selected writings on the Natural History of the Indies*, edited and translated by E.M. Beekman (Amherst, 1981).

[3]*Ten Thousand Things*, p.300-1.

[4]*Ibid.*, p.300.

[5]*Ibid.*, p.206.
[6]*Ibid.*, p.230.
[7]*Ibid.*
[8]*Ibid.*, p.179.
[9]*Ibid,*
[10]Rob Nieuwenhuys, *Mirror of the Indies. A History of Dutch Colonial Literature,* translated by Frans van Rosevelt. Edited by E.M. Beekman (Amherst, 1982), pp.184-188, 281.
[11]*Ten Thousand Things,* p.185.
[12]*Ibid.*, p.186.
[13]*Ibid.*, p.186-7.
[14]Quoted from memory.
[15]Dirkje Kuik, "De wonderbaarlijke wereld van Rodolphe Töpffer," *Vrij Nederland* (Amsterdam, January 17, 1976).
This essay also appears as the Afterword to:
Gerrit Komrij & Rodolphe Töpffer, *De zonderlinge avonturen van Primus Prikkebeen* (Amsterdam, 1980). See also: *The Comics, Rodolphe Töpffer's Essay on Physiognomy and the True Story of Monsieur Crépin*, translated and edited with an introduction by E. Wiese, (Lincoln, 1965).
[16]F.R. van Rosevelt, "Robert Henri Cateau van Rosevelt, 1784-1826," (re.: the Pattimura Uprising on Ambon), *Zeeuws Tijdschrift* / Royal Zeeland Society of Sciences, vol.18, no.4, (Middelburg), p.133-138.
[17]While in the Moluccas, he not only restored Rumphius' gravestone (it was again destroyed, by a bomb, during WW II), Van der Capellen also gave a memorable address to the native chiefs there, which Multatuli used for his speech to the chiefs of Lebak in his novel *Max Havelaar*.