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Inner jungles: Albert Alberts's "Groen", Stefan Zweig's "Der Amokläufer" and Heart of Darkness

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Coen van 't Veer

Alblasserdam

IN HIS *MIRROR OF THE INDIES*, Rob Nieuwenhuys dedicates nearly two pages to a review of Albert Alberts's story "Groen." Nieuwenhuys remarks that the theme of the European who becomes insane in the solitude of the jungle is a recurrent one in literature (1978: 509), particularly in that of the Dutch East Indies. The same theme also recurs in *Der Amokläufer* by Stefan Zweig and "Heart of Darkness." On close inspection these three stories show remarkable parallels, and it seems likely, as well, that Conrad's novella influenced both Alberts and Zweig, although this is a subtle matter rather than a case of overt borrowing. There are also moments at which Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, "An Outpost of Progress," and *Victory* seem influential, as palimpsests lying in the background.

Alberts's "Groen"

In 1949, the Dutch novelist and short-story writer Albert Alberts (1911–95) made his debut with "Groen" (Green) in the literary magazine *Libertinage*. In 1952, the story opened his collection *De eilanden* (The Islands). "Groen" is a diary-like narrative in the first person by a government official stationed on a remote island in the Dutch East Indies. To the south of this outpost is the sea; to the other directions lies an immense jungle. Here he meets the indigenous village chief and his colleague Peartree (Peereboom in Dutch), the only other European on the island. Peartree, stationed at a few days walking distance, is an alcoholic whose wife has left him for another man. He has a year more to go on the island. From him the government official learns that the edge of the jungle is about a hundred miles to the north. He decides on a plan to record all activity in his district very accurately, and feels the need to travel to and past the jungle's northern edge. He has seen that villagers do go into the jungle, but that they tend to avoid the north.

Every other fortnight the two men visit each other. After his arrival, the government official sets out on his first walk through the forest to Peartree. On his arrival the two colleagues start drinking heavily, and the drunken Peartree shouts that he would like to cut down the whole forest. A fortnight later the ship, which for the two is their sole monthly contact with the outside world, moors off the island again. Peartree is now staying with his colleague, whose plans to walk to the jungle's northern edge are materializing. He is having two settlements built in the woods to cover the hundred miles more easily. More and more often he wanders around in the mysterious northern forest, and eventually is completely enthralled by its magic. He determines to find the edge of the jungle to discover what lies beyond and even cancels his fortnightly visit to Peartree, who then decides to visit him instead. One day, after a huge effort, the governor reaches the northern jungle's edge and is greatly pleased with what he sees: "A great bare land, with many stones, big stones, hilly, with hazy blue mountains in the distance" (42).¹ But, on turning around towards the jungle a great anxiety seizes him: "The sky was a mouldy grey and beneath that sky, against that sky, was the forest, poisonous green in the glaring light of the grey sky, a layer of slithering sliding snakes" (43). After three days, and back home, he thinks he is losing his sanity.

One evening about four months after setting foot on the island, he arrives home at the end of a two-day walk. He recalls that the previous day the ship moored off the island, and expects his colleague to be there still but sees no one, and the house is dark. Walking towards the lamp-stand to place his burning light, he finds Peartree hanging from it. The official takes flight and starts drinking, returning home at daylight. Meanwhile Peartree's body has been taken down and has been laid in an empty house. After a short ceremony he is buried. At the end the official decides to keep the burning lamp hanging from the stand as he used to "Because I am still alive" (45).

Zweig's *Der Amokläufer*

It is unclear if the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig ever went to the Dutch East Indies where his novella *Der Amokläufer*, published in his *Amok*

¹ Quotations from "Groen" and *Der Amokläufer* are from the English translations listed in Works cited.

(1922), is mainly set.² In the story, the background of an odd incident on the mail-boat *Oceania* docked at Naples in March 1912 is gradually revealed. The first-person narrator, a nameless world traveller who has departed from Calcutta, tired with all the impressions from the East and daily bustle aboard a mail-boat, looks for nocturnal peace and quiet on the foredeck. There he meets a German doctor in his forties, who tells him his life story in the darkness of night. Once a promising physician at Leipzig, the man became enthralled by a haughty and cold woman who persuaded him to steal hospital funds.

When his theft became public he fled to Holland to avoid trial, and in Rotterdam, signed a ten-year contract as a colonial government physician. He sends half his earnings to his uncle who had helped him escape, and is tricked out of the other half by a woman resembling his lady friend at Leipzig. In the East Indies the doctor finds himself at an outstation. For some time he enjoys a certain reputation by performing a remarkable operation, but later gives up contact with Europeans, preferring drink and dreams, yearning for Europe. With two years of his contract remaining a European woman approaches him for an abortion. Pregnant by her lover, she faces her husband's imminent return from America. She turns to the German because of his reputation and because he practises at an outpost, a guarantee for discretion, offering him 12,000 guilders for the operation and his silence. The doctor falls for her haughty behaviour and refuses the offered sum, promising to perform the operation if she sleeps with him. The woman rejects his proposal and goes away, leaving him shattered.

Acknowledging his mistake, he realizes that he is obsessed with her, and now wishes to subject himself completely to her. The thought of letting her go drives him insane. He loses all self-control and runs after her frenzied like an amok-maker, but her boy stops him.³ Without reporting his absence he leaves his station to present himself to her in the town, but she refuses to receive him. At an evening party organized

² In 1928, he visited Ceylon, India and the Himalayas, and Burma and Indochina (Prater 1972: 40).

³ Examining the phenomenon on the basis of historical data in English, Spores (1988) arrives at this definition: "Historically, amok represents a behavioral constellation unique to the Malay context and distinguishable from similar patterns occurring in other cultures. It is a culture-specific syndrome wherein an individual unpredictably and without warning manifests mass, indiscriminate, homicidal behavior that is authored with suicidal intent" (7).

by the government, he sees her again, running right across the ballroom when he sees her leave. With an apt remark about a prescription for a servant, she saves her face and his. In despair the doctor decides to commit suicide, but first writes a letter to the woman in which he begs for forgiveness and urges her to trust him so that he can help her. He receives an answer: "Too late! But wait where you are. I may yet send for you" (57). When called for it turns out to be too late indeed. The woman has asked a Chinese woman in the remote quarter of the kampong for an abortion and is in danger; however much he struggles, the doctor cannot save her but succeeds in persuading a senior surgeon to concoct a false death from heart failure.

At some point the doctor meets her lover, to whom he feels closely related, but he avoids her husband. He leaves for Europe in the same mail-boat as the husband and her coffin: "I feel her dead presence, and I know what she wants. I know it, I still have a duty to do ... I'm not finished yet, her secret is not quite safe, she won't let me go yet" (74). He fears there may be an autopsy in Europe, which, desiring to protect her secret, he wishes to prevent at all costs. In Naples harbour an odd accident occurs:

at a quiet time in order to avoid upsetting the passengers, the coffin of a distinguished lady from the Dutch colonies was to be moved from the ship to a boat, and it had just been let down the ship's sides on a rope ladder in her husband's presence when something heavy fell from the deck above, carrying the coffin away into the sea, along with the men handling it and the woman's husband, who was helping them to hoist it down. One newspaper said that a madman had flung himself down the steps and onto the rope ladder. (76)

Narrative Roles, Points of View, and Conrad

In these stories and in "Heart of Darkness" the main roles have been given to pairs, one losing his sanity and dying, while the other chronicles this madness and demise. The chronicler can speak from experience, although the point of view, affected by madness, is unreliable and coloured by obsession.

In *Alberts's* tale, point of view, as famously in "Heart of Darkness," is unreliable. The narrator provides conflicting facts: at one point the distance between the colleagues' houses is sixty miles, at another a mere thirty. The government official definitely shows little insight into and interest in the people around him and has difficulty assessing the natives.

He has no idea that Peartree is in need of contact, and, worse, will hardly listen to him. The following dialogue develops in an alcoholic stupor:

I ask him: Peartree, that wood you cut here? I didn't, Peartree says. I say, that wood, in short, and I wave with my hands, could it be used for lumber? He doesn't know, he says. I want you to cut some, I say. Chop the whole goddamn forest down, Peartree yells, beat the hell out of that entire forest! Can it be used for carpentry? I ask. I don't know, Peartree says. (38)

As the story develops the point of view becomes increasingly unreliable. Losing himself further and further in the forest, the government official falls prey to madness. Thus, in "Groen," the roles of narrator and madman are united in a single person. This, however, is not altogether the case. Like his namesake the European fruit tree, which would wither there, the Dutchman Peartree has been unable to survive in the jungle and his story is an extension of that of the government official. Thus the latter's history throws light on what the former must have endured.

Der Amokläufer's point of view is likewise unreliable. The world traveller announces that he is going to uncover the possible cause of a fatal accident on the *Oceania* and takes the doctor's stories as a starting-point. The doctor, however, under the influence of alcohol, is going increasingly mad. In the end, the unreliability does not affect the story's interpretation. Even if the world traveller is vague about what happened, it must have been the doctor who jumped on top of the coffin to follow his beloved into death, a twist on the mermaid motif. The story disallows other interpretations, and Zweig, in this naturalistic tale, is concerned with rendering an accurate analysis of the doctor's insanity; the world traveller leaves no room for misunderstanding: "Odd psychological states have a positively disquieting power over me; I find tracking down the reasons for them deeply intriguing, and the mere presence of unusual characters can kindle a passionate desire in me to know more about them, a desire not much less strong than a woman's wish to acquire some possession" (18-19).

The Colonial Outpost

All three stories present a grim picture of life far from Western civilization. The characters attempt to assuage loneliness and boredom with alcohol or obsession. *Der Amokläufer's* insane doctor tells his listener that the Dutch East Indies are cursed:

But then a man's strength ebbs away in this invisible hothouse, the fever strikes deep into him – and we all get the fever, however much quinine we take – he becomes listless, indolent, flabby as a jellyfish. As a European, he is cut off from his true nature, so to speak, when he leaves the big cities for some wretched swamp-ridden station. Sooner or later we all succumb to our weakness, some drink, others smoke opium, others again brawl and act like brutes – some kind of folly comes over us all.

(25)

The few Europeans whom the doctor knows bore him, and the indigenous people, continually referred to as “yellow,” are miles beneath him. He rates them not much higher than animals: “bear in mind that for seven years I've lived almost entirely with the local natives and with animals” (23), he says to illustrate his loneliness in one of the nocturnal conversations on the foredeck.

In “Heart of Darkness,” Europeans bent on profit have ruined the country. Meaninglessness and corruption are everywhere, and barbarian practices, usually to the cost of the native population, are the order of the day. Nowhere is the contrast between light and darkness more poignant. The natives are slaves who have to work for the Europeans until they drop dead or turn into warring cannibals. The settlement is a desolate place where white exploits black, everything rots away, and a hostile nature threatens to engulf everything.

The colonial government official in “Groen” is situated on a remote island, visited once a month by a supply ship. His post is a village on the coast that is surrounded by a forest on three sides. In her article on Alberts's fiction about the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch writer Hella Haasse pays a great deal of attention to “Groen.” According to her, the government official in this story is “a ‘baru,’ a newcomer, who despises everything on the island which becomes his temporary home, the sea at the shore, the beach, the village, the house, the coffee and the cups from the village chief; who from boredom is well on his way of becoming an alcoholic” (1983: 34). He makes no real contact with anyone, not even with Peartree. At first they still visit each other, but later the government official neglects these.

Men with a Mission

The European main characters passionately pursue an ideal in these colonies. This passion soon becomes an obsession, a lust that must be satisfied. This eventually causes the downfall of the character. A reckless journey during which a lofty goal is pursued with ruthless fanaticism, is followed by disillusionment and ultimately death.

The doctor in *Der Amokläufer* saw his hasty departure for The Indies as a flight forward and had high expectations of his stay in the colony:

I had so many dreams, I was going to learn the language and read the sacred texts in the original, I was going to study the diseases; do scientific work; explore the native psyche – as we would put it in European jargon – I was on a mission for humanity and civilisation. Everyone who comes here dreams the same dream.

(24)

Having found his dream about the tropics shattered, the doctor remains in apathy for a long time. Then his weakness for arrogant ladies once more emerges. He falls in love, in an all consuming and obsessive way, with an arrogant white lady who has come to him for an abortion. Her rejection only serves to kindle his passion. Even after her death he keeps doing everything he can to serve her. That he sees as his mission, his ultimate duty. He ends up sacrificing his life in order to keep her secret safe.

Kurtz is the man who will bring the European light into the African darkness. By those around him he is seen as an outpost of Western civilization. The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had even asked him to write a report as a guide for future policy. Marlow has handled and read it finds that “It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words” (*Youth* 50).

The government official in “Groen” sets himself a modest goal at first. He has four notebooks in which he will carefully record all activity on the island. He gives them titles: “Fishery Report, Forest Products, In General and Timber Crop.” He wishes to put the world around him into categories, thus reducing it to a neatly arranged whole. Later he becomes hypnotized by the elfish Northern Forest. He develops an irresistible urge to conquer and control it. He shall and will reach the edge of the Northern Forest.

Through Light to Darkness

In the three stories the archetypal contrast between light and darkness is central. Light generally denotes positive things such as reason, intellect, knowledge, progressive thinking, moral values, enlightenment and the good, order, the exalted and the divine. By contrast darkness stands for spiritual darkness, regression, the primitive, undeveloped potential, sin, misfortune, anxiety, instinct, failure, chaos, the vile, the evil, the diabolical. There is no balance in these tales. At the beginning of the stories the main characters still cherish enlightened ideas, at the end they turn out to have moved into utter darkness. That is because the unconscious has come to determine the thoughts and behaviour of the main characters. In their surroundings they gradually move away from what in classical psychoanalysis is called the super-ego: a moral and ethical standard formed in their Western society directing their behaviour. Their conscience has gone. The unconscious takes over, and creates room for behaviour driven by primitive instincts and fears and by the satisfaction of passions.

In the three stories the jungle serves as an obvious metaphor for the unconscious. In "Groen," the northern jungle is called "a fairy-tale sanctuary" (38), a "fairy castle" (39), and "my magic forest" (41). In the jungle, as in fairy tale, time seems to have stopped, and the jungle literally swallows the government official:

It is remarkable how the forest changes in this direction. It does not become dense and the ground cover stays the same, everything the same, and I am no exception. When I am in my house, in the village, or during the journeys with the village chief, scouts, and the rest, I change like a chameleon. I am courteous, interested, drunk, all depending on the place and circumstances. Here, in the Northwood, the place and circumstances stay completely the same and this sameness becomes intensely evident in the green light. (34-35)

Light is an important motif in "Groen." The yellow light of the lamp is comforting, whereas the disturbing green light equalizes everything. The jungle takes away all the governor's characteristics, and he is compelled to fuse with his surroundings. At the same time he experiences the impossibility of that, because in the process he will lose himself. His fairy tale turns out to be malicious, and in the timeless mystic

Northwood the ultimate fear reveals itself: the fear of the uncontrollable unconscious.

The doctor of *Der Amokläufer* is stationed in the jungle as well. In Europe he already had difficulty restraining his instinct, but now disregards all caution. At the end he pursues darkness, when on the ship he opts for a nocturnal life. He cloaks himself in protective darkness, because the circumstances of the European woman's death, his role in this story, and the dark unsavoury stirrings in his soul cannot bear the light of day.

In "Heart of Darkness," the jungle is consistently linked with darkness. Upon first seeing the jungle Marlow describes as "so dark green to be almost black" (60). Kurtz has penetrated into the heart of the unconscious and found only darkness there. In psychoanalysis having direct access to the unconscious signifies ultimate freedom, a state hardly ever reached although Kurtz has explored his unconscious in search of this ultimate freedom. Compelled to sacrifice his super-ego for this, he has become insane.

The Fall

In *Der Amokläufer*, in the darkness of the *Oceania's* foredeck, the doctor, who is becoming insane, diagnoses his disease. His preference for dominant European women, the weakness of his character, and the isolation of the tropics form the basis of his illness. The meeting with the veiled white lady will be his downfall. In a moment of brightness he compares his disposition with that of an amok runner, first describing the emotions leading to amok:

a sort of human rabies, an attack of murderous, pointless monomania that bears no comparison with ordinary alcohol poisoning. ... It may have something to do with the climate, the sultry, oppressive atmosphere that weighs on the nervous system like a storm until it suddenly break. (44)

He goes on by using the example of an inland amok runner to describe the more physical appearance:

this is how it goes: a Malay, an ordinary, good-natured man, sits drinking his brew, impassive, indifferent, apathetic ... when suddenly he leaps to his feet, snatches his dagger and runs out into the street going straight ahead of him, always straight ahead,

with no idea of destination. With his *keris* he strikes down anything that crosses his path, man or beast, and his murderous frenzy makes him even more deranged. He froths at the mouth as he runs, he howls like a lunatic ... but he still runs and runs and runs. (44)

The German doctor bolts off, literally and figuratively, and his instincts take control. Eventually he is completely obsessed, and can only be his reasoning self when he is professionally bound to fight for the life of his patient and beloved. He loses the battle, and after it lives only to keep the cause of her death a secret, which, by diving onto her coffin, he drags to the depths, although he had already revealed it to the world traveller.

In "Groen" the government official's madness increases in proportion to his obsession with the Northern Forest and the need to discover what is beyond. During his first trip to the Northern Forest he loses his way. Not until it grows dark does he see the light of his house again. In stages he works towards conquering the jungle until crossing of the border and going past the edge. When he has succeeded he turns round, looks back and discovers that the jungle, not conquered, looks more frightening than ever. He now realizes that it is hostile territory, and yet he must go back. One day after his return from his trip to the edge of the Northern Forest the following occurs:

This evening I sit on my bed with my head in my hands and a little later I walk out of the house at the back and go between the trunks to the front. I am not afraid in the evening or at night, because the green snakes above me are then as dead. I stand behind a tree and I look at the circle of light of the lamp. A table and a chair. Then I go back again along the same path. It is a game that I play again every evening. I am going crazy, I think. (43)

On returning from a trip a month later, his lamp has somehow gone out. Peartree is hanging from the lamp-stand as a forbidding, enlightening example. Now madness truly strikes him. The only thing he can think of to keep chaos at bay is something resembling a nursery rhyme. He seems to be doting, and, drunk, starts to rave:

How dark it is, they all took off, and I have left my lantern behind, back there, I have left it hanging. Oh God, I have left Peartree hanging, for how long, at least half the night, I murdered him. If only he hadn't been dead when I arrived. It

was his intention, wasn't it, *rien que pour vous servir, mon très cher*.
A la lanterne, Peartree. I am going to hang myself from a tree, ha-
 ha. Oh well. (44)

With his deed, driven by madness, Peartree has obscured the assuring yellow light. The green has triumphed. The government official is completely out of his wits. Only several hours later is he capable of arranging a respectable funeral. His colleague's suicide eventually leads to the official's understanding: Peartree's death is a warning. He will have to change or a similar lot will befall him. He realizes that he is essentially alike, and Peartree could cope no longer. Alcohol could no longer calm his overwrought nerves. All that lonely solitude, the boredom, and his fears made him lose touch with his reasoning self. The visits were his last link with Western civilization's norms and values. When he stopped, he became a prey to his unconscious. The jungle overwhelmed him. The last few words of the story are: "I leave the lit lamp hanging from the standard like before. Because I am still alive" (45). According to Hella Haasse, these lines suggest that it is yet possible for the official to experience a different reality however alien to him (1983: 34).

In "Heart of Darkness," all the characters are affected by the darkness. Kurtz, however, falls most deeply into it, becoming the first and foremost of the devils of the land and establishing a cruel tyranny over the natives as his primitive instincts take control. Kurtz lapses into a primitive state, allowing himself to be governed by his unconscious. The change in his behaviour is best described in the very sentences meant to be a guideline for future policy on the last page of the report for The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "Exterminate all the Brutes!" (51). His enlightened ideas have not survived his social and moral isolation, and have been exchanged for instincts, swallowed up by darkness.

The difference between Marlow and Kurtz is restraint, which is driven by the super-ego. Marlow is affected by the darkness, but his super-ego functions sufficiently, and he steps back at the right moment; Kurtz flings himself into the darkness in complete surrender. He experiences his ultimate moment of horror when he gains insight into the darkness within. As Marlow observes after Kurtz dies: "Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (69).

Conclusions

The striking thematic and structural similarities between “Groen,” *Der Amokläufer*, and “Heart of Darkness” point to cross-connections within different colonial literatures. The question is where these parallels originate. Although Alberts and Zweig make no reference to “Heart of Darkness” in their tales, Conrad’s novella must have influenced them. Since its publication in book form in 1902, “Heart of Darkness” has cast a long shadow across colonial and post-colonial writing, and Alberts and Zweig must have known Conrad’s story and its reputation.

The three tales share similar thematic materials, and by comparing “Groen,” *Der Amokläufer*, and “Heart of Darkness” a basic trope of colonial literature emerges about Europeans who lose their sanity in a tropical outpost. These are three tales with a more or less unreliable point of view. Each of the main characters is an isolated individualist, out of contact with Western civilization at a jungle outpost, an essentially alien environment characterized by hostile nature. In their misery the central characters adopt a passion that eventually grows into an obsession, and in due course they lose all self-restraint, are no longer able to control their primitive instincts, and, finally, become mad as the super-ego becomes unable to restrain the forces of the unconscious.

A reckless journey, during which a lofty goal is pursued with extreme fanaticism, is followed by disillusionment, madness, and death. Before insanity drives its victims to their ends there is a moment of contemplation, understanding, and clarity. The narrator, who has a reflective function, feels that this madness is sneaking up on him as well but manages to keep the threat at bay. He has been marked and purged by what he has heard, seen, and experienced, and, by extension, the reader is similarly, after reading such stories, so marked and so purged.

Acknowledgements

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