



**THE TEN
THOUSAND THINGS**
MARIA DERMOÛT

TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
HANS KONING

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

MARIA DERMOÛT (1888–1962) was born on a sugar plantation in the Dutch East Indies and educated in Holland. She then returned to the Indies with her husband, a jurist, and spent thirty years living in, she later wrote, “every town and wilderness of the islands of Java, Celebes, and the Moluccas.” In 1951, at the age of sixty-three, Dermoût published her first book, a memoir called *Yesterday*. Her celebrated novel *The Ten Thousand Things* was published in 1955.

HANS KONING, born Hans Koningsberger in Amsterdam, came to this country in 1951 and established himself as an American writer in 1958 with his first novel, *The Affair*. Among his other novels are *A Walk with Love and Death*, *The Petersburg Cannes Express*, *The Kleber Flight*, and, most recently, *Zeeland, or Elective Concurrences*.

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INTRODUCTION

I WAS ON my way back to the U.S.—by ship, for this was more than forty years ago—and I was sitting on deck, reading the galleys of a Dutch novel which Alice van Eugen-van Nahuys, the editor of the Dutch publishing house Querido, had given me, “to read on your voyage.” (I had just completed my own first novel, for Knopf, and Alice was going to publish its Dutch translation; I was still writing under my Dutch name, Hans Koningsberger.)

Those galleys I was reading were of *The Ten Thousand Things*, by Maria Dermoût, a Dutch woman then living in Holland, in Noordwyk on Sea, but born and raised in the Dutch East Indies, the present Indonesia. Maria was thirty-five years older than I but the novel was her first too. It was long ago, but I remember it like yesterday: the ship, a high wind as always blowing over the North Sea, and tears running down my face. That was one of the most beautiful, and saddest, stories I had ever read.

Back in New York I took it to Bob Gottlieb, my editor at Simon and Schuster, and told him he just had to publish it here. Those were less mercenary times in our publishing world but all the same the word “translation” scared Bob off. I don’t recall why I didn’t try another publishing house; instead I translated the first two or three chapters “on speculation,” that is, just for the hell of it, and then of course he took it. “Of course,” for that novel burned like a beacon. Yes, it was sad, a quality publishers have trouble with, but it wasn’t

sad in a downbeat way. It was sad in a tough, wise, and wonderful way.

Holland and its (at that time) ten million inhabitants are definitely not as stolid and impassive as the readers of *Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates* and most other Americans may believe; it has produced a fine body of modern literature and especially poetry. Yet I admit that its fiction reflects the undramatic calm of a well-governed and advanced country. There were two exceptions to that calm in the past century: the German occupation of Holland in the Second World War, and before that war, its role as a colonial power. The German occupation was a disease, cured when the war was won. The colonial empire may now be seen as a disease too, a state of mind the present world is freeing itself from (although it may be argued that in a more subtle way it is still very much with us). But there was more to it than that. It gave a sense of drama larger than would have come from those ten million on the shores of the North Sea alone. To a writer, it added a dimension to his or her imagination.

Yet Dutch literature produced no Kipling. To the contrary, the "colonial" writer still best known today, Multatuli, was a bitter opponent of colonialism and that was precisely what gave a fierceness to his work. The same was true for other serious writers touched by the Indies, Louis Couperus, the only Dutch novelist ever to make it into the *American College Dictionary*, and Eduard du Perron, who died during the May 1940 war days of the invasion of the Netherlands. I myself was lucky enough to work a year for Indonesian radio just after the country had secured its independence and when its President Sukarno still deliberated with his staff in Dutch; it was easy then to see myself as a Dutch-American André Malraux.

But Maria Dermoût was sui generis, a case all her own. She did not write about her Indies as a Dutch woman, or as a Javanese or an Ambonese. Hers was a near-compassionate

disdain for the dividing lines, the hatreds and the fears. Some of her characters were Dutch but most of them were not; she dwelled on the color of their skins but that was in the context of aesthetics: a Scottish professor is ugly pale with freckles, a Javanese nobleman has a “fine light-brown face. . . . Yet he was not feminine in his gracefulness.”

She *Painted* landscapes, still lifes, and people in a world of myth and mystery.

That world rises from an interlocking of animals, plants, men, women, children, pearls lucky and unlucky (“tears of the sea”), sea anemones, jellyfish with little sails they can hoist when the wind is right, crabs waving their claws at the moon; and everyone and everything in it has a role and a fate, has in a sense a soul of its own. In a sense, Dermoût’s was an animism built not on primitive superstitions but on a love that encompasses all creation. In this world the great sin is to reject love when it is offered.

Felicia, the heroine of the novel (and she is a true heroine), is a young woman living with her child at the beginning of the twentieth century on one of the Spice Islands. She teaches her little son, Himpies, about the ten thousand things which make the island, but the riches of the teaching are lost when her son, who has grown up and become a soldier, gets killed by a headhunter’s arrow:

She wasn’t an oversensitive woman and certainly not sentimental, but she would always keep that deep and burning pity for those who had been murdered; she rebelled against it, murder, she couldn’t accept it, not for her son nor for anyone, not then, not now, and not in all eternity.

That woman is of course also Maria Dermoût, whose only son died in a Japanese concentration camp.

Within this novel, which flows like the clear mountain

streams it describes, there are moments when the story, when time itself, comes to a breathtaking standstill.

Thus when Himpies, who has gone to school in Europe, returns to the island as a young man, looking so very much like his father, her husband, that "stranger in a hotel in Nice" who had left Felicia long ago, without a word, taking her lucky jewelry with him (although she would have given it to him if he had asked, since "she loved him and always would"), "the tall, the handsome stranger . . . in a white uniform . . . her heart stopped beating. But when he was close, it was . . . someone else . . . the warm brown eyes of the boy Himpies and he said, 'Hello mother, there you are. . .'"

There is the young Javanese nobleman who is a clerk in a government office and who is assigned to assist the Scottish professor on a study voyage. He had been sent to the University of Leyden once, but after a year he received a letter that "for lack of funds" he had to come back. Thus he ends up a clerk.

But he keeps a portrait of his stepmother, a princess of the Javanese principality of Solo. In the picture she holds a parasol, she is dressed in velvet and batik, with all her diamonds and pearls; her name and rank are under the picture with the added words, "in travel costume":

And then he thought something he had never thought before.

He thought, when he was still young, in Leyden, when there was still time, if she had then pulled one ring from her slim fingers, or taken one clip from her ears, or the jeweled pin from her coat, or the gold and diamond brooch from her hat with the marabou feathers—but she hadn't, the Sir Princess in traveling costume.

And when there is a letter come from Himpies to the

town, and his mother has gone to collect it and returns home in the little boat—she looks at the water and

Suddenly there were three young turtles, all three of the same size, their shields gleaming, almost pink, with a symmetrical pattern of dark brown and yellow and black stripes and spots; each with its four fins waving up and down, young and yet with the same old man's bald head on a wrinkled neck, with little gleaming eyes under sleepy lids, and a large yellow beak like a bird's.

They let themselves drop, their fins upright, as if they were drowning, rose again; they kept together, swam over and under each other, carefully, not touching, with a strangely thoughtful and yet casual grace. Then, as unexpectedly as they had risen, they dropped down into the deep and did not reappear.

The following day she learns that just at that time her son was killed.

There is indeed no sentimentality in Maria Dermoût's novel. There is violence in it, murder; one day a year the lonely woman on the island has set aside to think of the murdered and the murderers of the island, to mourn them and to forgive them, and one of these is Himpies, who leaves her a victim of an unfathomable loneliness. "And she went . . . under the trees and indoors, to drink her coffee and try again to go on living."

When I saw Maria Dermoût last, a year before her death, she inscribed the English translation of her book for me, and dated it, "autumn, with sun, 1960." And in the note about herself which she wrote for the English translation, she said,

As long as I can remember, we were taught that every human being has his own value, that we should be grateful all men are not exactly alike. . . . When I write

about "then" and "there," it is not in mournful remembrance but because I see it so clearly in front of me. . . .

"Is it escape literature?" my grandchild asks me.

"Perhaps," I answer. "And what if it is?"

—HANS KONING