I do not get why you are being so negative and annoying . . . [...] Let us be happy together. Let us be optimistic. Let us say: The Netherlands can do it once more! That VOC mentality! Looking beyond borders! Dynamic! . . . Right?!¹

—Prime Minister of The Netherlands (2002-2010), Jan Peter Balkenende

Introduction

Our ears and eyes stumbled. Our skin crawled. Our body remembered. We split apart.

I remember in full that moment which has come to signify—in my humble opinion—an enunciation of the nation: the incitation by the Dutch Prime Minister quoted above.² During the General Deliberations on Prince’s Day the former prime minister of the Netherlands uttered our epigraph in response to the members of parliament’s critique of the ruling party’s budgetary plans. In that fleeting episode, my ears collected tones and pitches which gathered before my eyes in gestures. As avatar of the nation, Balkenende’s enunciation was an appeal to the minor characters on and off stage—royalty, politicians, citizens—to follow his lead in happiness and optimism of a bygone epoch. Possibly, to a bygone epoch? What better way to motivate the Dutch than resurrecting the past glory of their Golden Age? According to some Netherlanders, the Dutch Golden Age emerged with the foundation of the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (East India Company, henceforth VOC) in 1602. Other Netherlanders would argue it started in 1609 with the first year of the Twelve Year Truce between the Republic of Seven United Netherlands and Spain. During this
period, a few minor skirmishes ensued between the two countries; it was a period marked by relative peace such as that partially described by Kant. That is to say, when we follow a Kantian spirit, it will tell us that the Twelve Year Truce—while only temporary and thus no guarantee for perpetual peace (Kant 3)—signalled an epoch wherein the development of science and commerce took precedence over military preparedness (Wood 64). As a result, the nation entered a Golden Age as well as so-called world history. Here I imagine Hegel’s Zeitgeist (as successor of Kant’s spirit) to benevolently nod toward the Netherlands and affirm its place within universal History. But more importantly, and almost always understated, the violent force of colonialism plunged the Dutch into a Golden Age—a period that Susan Buck-Morss states “was made possible by their dominance of global mercantile trade, including, as a fundamental component the trade in slaves” (Buck-Morss 823). Given the occlusion of colonialism’s role in the Dutch Golden Age, I wish to meditate on the enunciation of the nation typified by—though certainly not limited to—Balkenende’s proclamation, on this narrative technique that infuses the nation with fumes of fortune, pristine potentialities, and an honorable History. Perhaps a pensive pause is the only adequate response to such brawny rhetoric, since the bravura belies a self evident posturing. Indeed, his pronouns betray him. One is obliged to ask who comprises and is excluded from the “us” in the enunciation? Furthermore, I find “it” ethically suspect: a perpetuation of a VOC mentality begs the question of which aspects of the VOC ought to be repeated—with or without a difference—in Balkenende’s call for action. Is “it” an attempt at achieving peace or techno-financial advancement? Whose borders and which peoples must be subjected to violation to restitute the embarrassment of former riches? Since his mandate lacks specification, questions such as these lurk in the undertones of enunciation.

In the course of this chapter, I develop the enunciation of the nation as a concept in order to approximate the colonial logics of Dutch nationalist discourse, with particular reference to the Dutch Saint Nicholas tradition. The enunciation of the nation is embedded in power, and power, however conceived, lies at the very heart of societies structured in dominance (Hall 1980). As such, Dutch nationalist discourse cannot be ignored if we want to understand how inequality is re-produced, re-worked and re-imagined through national cultures by subjects in a country such as the Netherlands which prides itself on liberal values.

From Nation to Enunciation
I note that Ernest Renan poses the question why Holland is a nation and furthers that it is “through an act of heroic resolution” (Renan 12–13). As such, I observe an alignment between the Prime Minister’s heroic resolve as it resounds with the heroism of the nation’s originary moment. Proceeding from this point, it becomes possible to begin a conceptualization of the enunciation of the nation as the protagonist’s quest