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Cees Nooteboom's *Rituelen:* Three characters in search of a sign

I don't propose to introduce Nooteboom in the usual way, by giving a brief biographical sketch. No doubt I could obtain the necessary details, but I think they are irrelevant. The important one is that he spends most of his time travelling all over the world, but of course, that one is inaccurate: he also stays still long enough to write books. He revealed in an interview with Marjan Berk[1] that he spends up to four months at a time in a small Spanish village in a house with no phone. Whether or not he sits at a grade school desk like the narrator of his novel *In Nederland*, I do not know, but no doubt he learns by writing, as that image implies. If he stays away from the Netherlands, it is because his country is not as interesting as the southern province he endows it with in that novel: an empty, wild and mountainous place, its population consisting of Calabrian bandits and the characters out of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. As he put it in the interview, "I don't go away out of restlessness, but at most out of frustration and unease."[2]

But he does not travel to run away *from* something, it is a search *for* something. For a perfect country, certainly, where everyone and everything are in their proper place; but if he finds it (as he felt he did in Burma) he knows there is no place in it for him; he feels then, said Koos Hageraats, "... the nostalgia of someone who would like to fit in somewhere, but cannot, and knows it isn't allowed."[3] And secondly and certainly his travels are a search for himself; he journeys — to quote Hageraats again — "... always away from himself and towards himself. The reader travels with him, looks at the world and sees Nooteboom — who wishes he wasn't there."

It may seem paradoxical for a writer to seek himself, and write about that search, and yet not wish to be in the picture. The paradox can perhaps be explained by uncertainty as to how, in his picture, he should draw himself. Rob Schouten reviewed a volume of Nooteboom's poetry with a title very relevant here, *Het gezicht van het oog,*[4] and argued that the core of Nooteboom's work is his poetry, because that is where he asks the ultimate questions, about the gulf between nature and its observer, and about the inability of words to record experience: "He is left with only doubt and amazement."

We should note also that Nooteboom carries with him on his travels a large quantity of past writers, a portable worldwide culture of his own. He carries it not only in physical form (notably, as he told Marjan Berk, contemporary poets and the classics in the Loeb's bilingual (i.e. Latin/Greek-English editions), but above all in his head. Like many a traveller who has had his mind broadened by a combination of travel and reading (I think of Gide), the cultural baggage he brings with him also becomes part of what he sees. Indeed, he travels in order to let this combination change him. To quote the review by Louise Fresco of *De wereld een reiziger:*[5] "The important thing is not Nooteboom's geographical movements [...] but the changes in his inner world, the

writer's world of thoughts [...] The writer doesn't observe, he lets himself be led through the world of his own thoughts."

Reviewers of this book are struck by a chapter in which he conflates, out of details of some of the many hotels he has stayed in, an ideal hotel room. I suspect that his ideal room in fact consists of his cultural baggage and his travel impressions. It is the interior which he takes refuge in at the end of a day of sightseeing. I will argue in a moment that *Rituelen* offers a series of such interiors or refuges.

One may ask: what is the purpose of passing through an external landscape solely in order to travel internally? In Nooteboom's case, the idea is to constantly rediscover and redefine *himself.* Without this activity, he might not know who he is. As he said to Marjan Berk, "The self, in my philosophy, is a fluid principle." One important contributor to our self-image is memory, but his is bad. She reminded him that she was present at a reading of his first novel *Philip en de anderen* (1955), which was then in manuscript; she was heavily pregnant, and so in a sense was he (with his novel). He admitted he remembered nothing of this. Likewise he could recall of his Catholic boarding schools only a general atmosphere and occasional images: "... margarine cut in a little star, bread with chocolate hail, the chaos of the war, the monastic regime."

Now, *Rituelen* is a novel designed to sum up years of experience of reality which Nooteboom has acquired by travel and just by living attentively — though research went into it as well, as he himself said:

> I wrote this book as if from memory; I had prepared it thoroughly and systematically, taking hundreds of notes over the years.[6]

So *Rituelen* is the fruit of long years of reflection about basic problems, and we may expect the problem of identity to be prominent among them. The novel in fact presents three generations of men who have a problem accepting any religious faith. This fulfils our expectations, because one's beliefs are an essential part of one's identity.

That the novel is about purely internal events is clear from its chronology. It revolves around three dates: 1953, 1963, and 1973, an arbitrary series clearly different from the dates of major political events that, for example, mark the life of Anton Steenwijk in Harry Mulisch's *De aanslag*. Nooteboom sets the short opening section on the date of President Kennedy's assassination, but this is ironic: all it means for the main character, Inni Wintrop, is a panic on the stock exchange, which he takes advantage of by buying gold. Of more interest to him is the fact that his wife leaves him and he tries to hang himself. (In 1983, we read in one brief paragraph, he sees his wife again). It is also with ironic intent that Nooteboom places this section first, out of chronological order, and calls it an interlude although its function is introductory. Clearly, what matters is not time, nor external events, but internal debates. The name Inni, with its implied seme "internal," is very apt.

If the novel starts in the chronological middle, the second part at least takes us back to the beginning, to 1953, to meet the oldest of the characters wrestling with loss of faith. Inni receives an unexpected visit from his aunt Therese; she informs him about his family, which he has had nothing to do with. They were all war profiteers, she says, but they all threw their money away on women and, in the process, they all lost their faith. As she tells him:

> Your father, your uncle Noud, your uncle Pierre, your aunt Claire, they're all either dead or flat broke. They all left the church to chase after a nice ass.[7]

It is aunt Therese who whisks Inni off to meet her former lover, the notary Arnold Taads, who arranges for Inni to inherit some of the family wealth. His home is the first of the interiors we see which, as I have suggested, are refuges from life and from doubt. A very austere refuge, to be sure, monastic in nature; even the dog is called Athos, after the mountain full of monasteries, in Greece. This is how Inni sees Arnold's room:

> The orderliness that reigned in the room was frightening [...] It was, Inni thought, a room like a mathematical problem. Everything was in equilibrium, each thing fitted with the other [...] all the furniture was gleaming white, of a hate-filled Calvinist modernity (46).

Arnold Taads keeps the world at bay by living by the clock. He reads for exactly an hour at a time; meals, walks with Athos, everything is scheduled. He proposes to die as he lives, in a pure white cold inhuman place. He intends to go and live in a Swiss alpine hut, six hours by ski from the nearest village, to which he will go once every two weeks to buy food. In his old age he may fall somewhere and his cries of *Hilfe!* may go unheard. (And so, years later, it happens). It is "a calculated risk," he says, using the English expression. To my mind it is not as inhuman as that: it is mathematics in the service of a crisis of belief — akin to the atheist who, as we read in Dostoyevsky, takes out his watch and gives God a quarter of an hour to prove He (God) exists by striking him (the atheist) dead by lightning. Inni can tell that a true atheist would not hate the church so passionately. For Arnold, Christianity is of uncertain origin and has a long history of barbarism. He tells a priest:

> Your religion still feeds on one sado-masochistic session that may never have taken place [...] The Western thirst for expansion and colonialism enabled it to spread, and the church you call a mother has more often been a murderer, usually a tyrant, and always a bully (87-8).

He believes that we exist and we die (whatever that is), and this is true of "the universe as well as a geranium." On this basis, Arnold calls himself an existentialist and quotes Sartre, though he feels responsible only for his own behaviour, not for other people's as in the Sartrean system: "I am not responsible for the vermin around me" (63).

Part III. In 1973, Inni is visiting an art dealer in Amsterdam, and a small, slim man of Oriental appearance is staring intently at a Japanese tea bowl in the window, which in its subtle irregularity "looked as if it had come into being spontaneously and not been made by man" (131). It lives in a world completely alien to Inni — he knows "only" about European art — and indeed even the dealer's premises are alien: "an idle, elevated abstraction of Asia" with "only a few objects, but displayed with extreme refinement." When Philip Taads — for the young man is he, the son of Arnold Taads by a wife brought home from Indonesia then abandoned — explains to him about tea bowls, Inni realizes that "this art [...] stemmed from a culture and a tradition that were not his and could never become his" (136).

Philip's apartment is of the same world, and is in startling contrast with the decaying quarter of Amsterdam known as the Pijp where it is located:

> Everything in it was white. Here you were far from the world, in a rarefied cold mountain landscape, or rather in a monastery high in the mountains (142).

It looks Japanese here, Inni says, but Philip

replies:

> I have never been to Japan. Modern Japan is vulgar. We have infected it. It would destroy my dream to go there (144).

Nooteboom has given Philip Taads characteristics acquired by heredity and from his environment. Philip is of his time in turning to the East for spiritual solutions, like so many people in the seventies, of whom Inni feels that

> No sooner had they slammed the door of the church behind them than they crawled like beggars to the bare feet of gurus and swamis (148).

And he is of his family, i.e. like his father, in desiring to be free of the world and free of himself. Arnold said he detested himself, Philip says "I hate the thing that I am" (149) But his father hated the world, and Philip. has overcome that; therefore he can now leave the world, as soon as the right moment comes.

And the right moment comes when the art dealer acquires another superb tea bowl and Philip buys it. Like the previous one, it seems "not made by man but born in an unnameable prehistory" and therefore

> The thought that things had to be seen by people in order to exist was not valid here, for if there were such a thing as a nirvana for objects, this raku tea bowl had reached it ages ago (173).

In due course Philip invites Inni and the art dealer to a tea ceremony, conducts it perfectly, and — having thus accomplished something in his life — he breaks his perfect bowl and goes out and drowns himself. In this way he imitates Rikyu, the founder of the tea ceremony, who, as we read in a concluding epigraph to the novel, smashed his bowl in the presence of his disciples, then went out and killed himself.

The evident parallels here with the Christian communion service accumulate throughout the last pages. Reflecting on bowls and cups, Inni thinks that they are nothing in themselves, but they must be made of the right material to receive "something that comes from above, from the higher world of suns, moons, gods and stars" (158). And this is true regardless of the historical accidents that give birth to religions:

> If Christ had been born in China or Japan, tea would now be turned into blood every day on five continents (159).

In the same vein, the art dealer, having sold Philip the bowl, feels like Judas; the flowers in Philip's room are "the colours of autumn and Advent"; Inni recalls kneeling for other ceremonies in his childhood; Philip's ceremonial robes look like a chasuble worn over an alb; and as Inni drinks the tea he thinks: "Do this in remembrance of me" (175-181). These words occur also in the prayer consecrating the communion wine, which form the epigraph to Part II of the novel, a passage which is clearly a pendant to the story of Rikyu.

We have come back to Catholicism. Not to Arnold Taads' faith, however, but to Inni's. For indeed, this drama of loss of faith involves three men and not two. Inni himself no doubt wishes to believe that he is not involved in this, nor indeed in anything else, for he sees life as a strange club you can always resign from if it gets too boring (13). As he says, speaking first of all of the other boys at boarding school:

> He had nothing to do with them, any more

> than with this man [Arnold] who had just strayed into his life. He refused to let them in, that was what it boiled down to. It was just as if everything was happening in a film. Even when he felt sympathy for the actor, he remained in the audience(69).

But shortly afterwards, we read that:

> One of his characteristics — and this too he did not know at the time, because whatever his own views on the matter he had simply not yet lived long enough — was that he could never turn his back on anyone in whom he had once become interested (71).

In other words, his belief in his detachment from reality, from people, is only a belief.

As for his Catholicism, Inni feels that the little faith he had ever possessed "had simply dripped out of him like oil from a leaky engine" (25). As a schoolboy, the ritual of the Mass fascinates him, as a means of escape from here and now into ancient blood-boltered myths; but that fascination does not survive the death by a heart attack, during Mass, of an aged priest whom Inni is serving as altar boy. The priest pulls the altar cloth, bread and wine down on top of him, screaming:

> His head hit the chalice and started to bleed. When he was already dead, he still went on bleeding, red and red mingled with the islands of shiny silk amid the gold brocade; it was no longer clear which was which — the wine had become blood, the blood wine (56-57).

This demonstration of the theology of sacrifice and transubstantiation, instead of seeming a miracle, is for Inni the death of faith, the death of God — but if his faith has been leaking away, it is merely the moment at which he notices it has all gone.

What, then, does Inni adopt instead? Not Arnold's existentialism, in which God does not exist and man is responsible for himself alone. This is all too abstract for Inni, who still believes that feelings let us grasp reality better than reason can. Besides, even as a schoolboy, he felt that existentialism "still smacked of church. It had a suspect, sickly-sweet odour of martyrdom" (62). Instead, he sees his aunt's maid and falls in love with her; and there is his new religion:

> "My name's Petra," she said. On this rock, this soft round rock, he thought later, he had built his church (82).

This remark is not just a better play on words than Christ's, or more precisely one which works better in Latin: *tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam* (Matthew 16:18, Vulgate) is not quite as perfect as *tu es Petra et super hanc petram...* More than that, a religion of woman may perhaps achieve something better than this male religion founded by Christ that has given us "two thousand years of bloodshed" (57).

To confirm that this is a religion, we have an image that Nooteboom slowly develops, like the metaphor of the tea ceremony as Eucharist. The first and third time that Petra makes love with Inni, she performs fellatio on him. (The second time is more conventional). The first time, the reader is not thinking of religion when he reads:

> She [...] opened her mouth briefly so that he saw his white seed on her pink tongue [...] and swallowed (84).

But afterward, when he goes to Mass, the description of the communion wafer opens the reader's eyes:

> The dry light substance briefly clung to the soft damp flesh of his tongue. Then he swallowed and God began to seek His way down to his intestines where — this now

> seemed inevitable — He would be transformed into seed (105).

Inni's religion of woman is this: a man does not *take* a woman, he totally *surrenders to* her, in order to understand the world:

> If the world was a mystery, then women were the force that maintained it. They, and only they, had access to it [...] Women, all women, were a means to come close to a secret of which they, and not men, were the guardians (103).

But perhaps no woman ever reveals that to Inni as Petra did. Ten years later his wife Zita (a name evoking *vita* and *zoe*, two words for life) seems oddly alien to him; he does not realize that *he* has alienated *her*, by his weakness and fear of the future and of change (he had insisted on her having an abortion). He makes love to her more often, but neglects her, travels, and is multiply unfaithful. Comes the day when she falls in love with somebody braver, and decides to leave. Now, to be sure, Inni is always aware of a distance between himself and his partner. Of the second time with Petra, the conventional one, we read:

> It was as if her face disappeared and another took its place, wilder and at the same time remoter [...] Detached she was, far away. It was ominous, a force was breaking loose in her, enabling her to do all the things he would never be able to do — forget her name, this house, this room and him (97).

But once Zita has decided to leave Inni, she who had previously "yelled like a maniac" during lovemaking (24) shows a very different sort of detachment:

> She put her right hand to her mouth and moistened herself [...] he came inside her for the last time in a great annihilating silence that still continued when she pulled out from underneath him and walked out of the room, her hand between her legs (27).

His pickups are no better, to judge by a girl who casually takes him to bed in 1973:

> This, he understood, was a generation that did not waste time. They put you on and they took you off like a glove, efficient acts following quick decisions [...] The body as gadget. She came without missing a beat.

If the religion of women lets Inni down — or he lets *it* down — what is he left with? Two beliefs, it seems to me, one which involves chance and one which has rules. On the side of chance, it is not accidental that he writes a weekly horoscope for *Het parool* (a newspaper that I assume is not too intellectual). It earns him a few guilders, but there is more to it than that. Just before Zita leaves him, not knowing she is about to do so (or not consciously accepting that he knows, anyway), he jokes that you never see in the papers horoscopes like "Leo [it is his sign]: something awful will happen to you today, your wife will leave you and you will commit suicide" (25). She indeed leaves him, so he tries to hang himself, just in order to be consistent. He fails, Kennedy is shot and he makes a lot of money on the stock exchange, which an economist friend of mine calls the world's biggest bingo game. Chance is good to Inni.

None the less, he is not happy with it. If he plays the market, it is because he is confident he has discovered the rules of this particular game of chance:

> As far as he could see, the world was moving in an orderly capitalist fashion towards a logical, perhaps provisional, perhaps permanent end. When the dollar fell, gold went up; when interest rates went up, the property market collapsed; and as the number of bankruptcies multiplied, rare books increased in value. There was order in this chaos, and anyone who kept his eyes open was in no danger of hitting a tree. Admittedly you needed a car (171).

But for the rest of chance-governed life, he is still looking for the rules. Hence his apparently irrational act of seeking a sign in the fact that, one day, he sees in rapid succession a dead pigeon, a live pigeon (sitting on the girders under a bridge), and a pigeon that crashes into a store window and leaves a perfect imprint of itself in the greasy dust on the glass. To seek a sign instead of believing, of course, is condemned in the Gospels, and I am sure Nooteboom wishes us to think of that passage:

> Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered him saying, Master, we would seek a sign from thee.
>
> But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.

(Mathew 12:38-39, King James version. The New English Bible glosses the metaphor "adulterous" as "godless" — cf. the expression "whoring after strange gods.")

But then all the characters seek after a sign. Arnold waits to see if God will strike him dead in the mountains; Philip waits for chance or whatever to put the right tea bowl in his hands. And all three seek refuges. Arnold as I have said, has firstly his austere house in the Netherlands, and then the snowy Alps; Philip likewise creates for himself a Japanese monastery that never was, before seeking the hereafter.

It may seem that Inni does not seek a refuge, for he lives in hotel rooms a lot and does not declare himself attached to anywhere. But I think he has a refuge, and that is art. (How often does the bottom line of a novel in this century turn out to be: art is my salvation, I write therefore I am saved). This, I think, is the meaning of the image of the womb-like rabbit warren in which Inni's regular art dealer, a specialist in European art, carries on his business. You enter Bernard Roozenboom's establishment through three doors. After the first one comes a very quiet tiny hall; when you grasp the handle of the second door, a bell rings and you enter another room. After a while, if the dealer likes the look of you, you detect movement behind a glass skylight in the far wall, set at knee level because the room behind it is down some steps. This is Bernard's office; he calls it both the depths of Hell and his holy of holies. And behind *that*, leading to his library of reference works, there is a series of hallways and doors that have to be opened with keys.

Perhaps seeking signs and seeking refuges are two aspects of the same basic fear of life and its changes, of an unwillingness to take life as it comes — in other words, of a lack of faith, of the failure to find a religion to replace Christianity. It is all very well to cut adrift from the beliefs of your ancestors, but it is no easy thing to find another port, and the sea is rough.

Of the post-Christian faiths portrayed in this novel, perhaps art looks the best. It is a very modest one, as modern ones tend to be, but it is of this world, it makes this world bearable, it doesn't belittle it, and so it lets Inni live with his nightmares about Arnold and Philip. As he says in the last words of the novel:

> So there were two worlds: one where the Taadses were, and the other where they weren't; and luckily Inni was still in the second one (188).

NOTES

[1] *Algemeen Dagblad* 23 Oct. 1989. The newspaper cuttings I have used here were kindly supplied by the Stichting ter bevordering van de vertaling van Nederlands letterkundig werk.

[2] All translations from Dutch articles are mine.

[3] Quote by Koos Hageraats in his review of *De wereld een reiziger* in *De Tijd* 30 June 1989.

[4] *Vrij Nederland* 9 Sept. 1989.

[5] *Vrij Nederland* 27 May 1989.

[6] *Septentrion* 1985:1, p. 5. Translation mine.

[7] Cees Nooteboom: *Rituëlen*, Amsterdam: de Arbeiderspers, 1980, p. 40. The page references throughout are to the Dutch publication, and the translations are from the English version: *Rituals*, tr. Adrienne Dixon, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983, which I have modified in places, consulting the French translation: *Rituels*, tr. Philippe Noble, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985.