Most of the opera's cast (including Trix as Frasquita) is local, but the major soloists are imported from Amsterdam. The star tenor and the alcoholic baritone are sworn enemies, and the overblown Carmen has left behind her a trail of broken hearts. Cuperus is smitten with her. Before the dress rehearsal Nol realizes that he has loved Trix all his life.

Vestdijk's description of the performance is masterful. The baritone loses his voice but agrees to recite his role. Carmen, "more like a whorehouse madam than a gipsy girl... played the others off the stage." The baritone becomes blind drunk on too much rum and attempts to kill the tenor onstage. Cuperus knocks him out and is publicly accused of drunkenness by the provincial audience.

Nol grows up, goes to university to study medicine, and virtually loses contact with Trix, who becomes a manageress in the town's garden restaurant. Nol returns home to visit the dying Cuperus and his love for Trix is rekindled. During his mother's dying days, several months later, Nol declares his love for the defeated Trix, who reveals that she was seduced by Vellinga after the *Carmen* performance and later by several of his friends. Trix's subsequent suicide is less than convincing, but it allows Vestdijk to reveal the destructive nature of an uncomprehending, controlling society. In the final passage, Nol returns to the garden and tries to come to terms with the loss of his mother, Trix, and his own inevitable death:

> There was no point of departure and no point of return and almost no point of continuity, an incoherence that passed and melted away... what happened there was the beginning of the incurable pain of the grief that was now all I had, the grief that I wouldn't be without, that I would cling to even if an angel, moved by some arrogant whim, thought to hack it out of me with a fiery sword.

Vestdijk brilliantly evokes the ennui, lethargy, and prejudice in a small Frisian town and offers some superb insights into the human condition. Though *The garden where the brass band played* could be criticised for a rather insubstantial plot, there are many fine brief character portraits and superb descriptive details throughout the book. Vestdijk deals directly and intensely with the themes of external forces on character and of love which seemingly can only exist at a distance, and which is destroyed through any personal involvement.

It is difficult to accept some aspects of Vestdijk's style and beliefs in the late 1980s; but his literary control and characterization (ably helped by the natural, idiomatic translation by A. Brotherton) is beyond criticism. Like Vermeer, Vestdijk's palette is simultaneously warm and cool, involving and objective. Vestdijk has the skill and craftsmanship (like Dickens and Galsworthy at their best) to produce a haunting, almost cinematic narrative. One hopes for further translations of work by this remarkable writer.

Cees Nooteboom. *In the Dutch Mountains*. (Originally published in Dutch in 1983 as *In Nederland)*. Translated by Adrienne Dixon. 128 pp. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987.
Cees Nooteboom. *Rituals*. (Originally published in Dutch in 1980 as *Rituelen)*. Translated by Adrienne Dixon. 145 pp. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

William Rueter
University of Toronto Press

Cees Nooteboom is one of the most interesting of the postwar generation of Dutch writers. Born in 1933, he was educated at Franciscan and Augustinian monasteries. He is widely traveled and has produced numerous novels, short stories, poetry, travel books, and plays. His first novel, *Philip and the Others*, won the Second Prize from the Anne Frank Foundation in 1957, and *Rituals* was chosen to receive the 1982 Pegasus Prize for Literature.

Nooteboom writes in a spare, surreal style and, like Vestdijk, his characters are distanced from life. He balances myth against reality and truth against illusion; his writing has a dream-like logic verging on nightmare.

In the Dutch Mountains is a superlative case in point. The book's title refers to a much larger area than the province of Limburg: a fantastic South Holland of hidden caves, border police, rivers and forests, rough people, and primitive travel, far away from the Central Government in The Hague.

"Once upon a time", it begins, "there was a time that some people say is still going on." The author of the tale, Alfonso Tiburon de Mendoza, is the inspector of roads in Aragon, who once studied in Holland. He learned the guttural language which he believes is "the result of the inclement conditions, such as breached dykes, east winds and pack ice, which plagued [the Dutch] in the past."

In a deserted hot schoolroom in Aragon, Alfonso

writes his frequently meandering tale of the innocents Lucia and Kai, children of circus performers, against whose faultlessness and congruity all others must be judged. They become illusionists, and when there is no more work available in the North their agent finds a tour for them in the South.

This is the beginning of their adventure: a dream-like parody of Andersen's *The Snow Queen* as it might be seen by Kafka, Julian Barnes, or Kundera. There is a passing reference to the original tale; a hotel room contains a print of a girl on a reindeer, surely Andersen's original heroine Gerda. Kai gets a speck of glass or grit in his eye and is kidnapped by the Snow Queen and her gang. Lucia and Anna, a female clown (the counterpart of Andersen's reindeer), pursue them. The pain in Kai's eye and the Snow Queen's lovemaking become part of Kai's increasing unreality until he is rescued by Lucia and Anna.

The story and Alfonso's meandering commentary become interwoven and distorted together. Past and present tenses combine. Nooteboom adds a comment on the myth of Christianity within his lacunae on the Andersen tale. As Alfonso's tale/myth/novel ends (or possibly begins), the author plays hopscotch in the abandoned Spanish schoolyard and sits "happily ever after."

In the Dutch Mountains is deceptively slight. Within its pages Nooteboom challenges, jogs, and bullies the reader into re-evaluating the nature and form of the fairy tale. It is a remarkable, original, disturbing, and ultimately triumphant book that deserves the widest readership.

Rituals, Nooteboom's earlier and slightly more conventional novel, also deals with the complexity of time and the conflict between myth and reality. Almost as sparely written as *In the Dutch Mountains,* its three sections investigate the rituals of its hero, Inni Wintrop, a former Catholic, recently divorced, emotionally detached Dutch dilettante.

The first section, entitled 'Intermezzo', occurs in 1963, before the Provos and Vietnam. it is in some respects the midpoint of the book. He is a self-hater, aimless, 'a hole,' without a central thought.

> He regarded life as a rather odd club of which he had accidentally become a member and from which one could be expelled without reasons having to be supplied. He had already decided to leave the club if the meetings should become too boring.

Inni's consciousness is a series of unrelated fragments, 'barely connected snapshots at which nobody would ever look.' He has a brief affair with a barmaid, while his wife takes up with an impoverished Italian photographer. Inni's wife leaves him (as he predicted in the horoscope he writes for *Het Parool*). His suicide attempt on the day of Kennedy's assassination is abortive, and the only reality is his success on the stock market.

The second section takes us back a decade to 1953, when Inni meets his Aunt Therese and Arnold Taads, a former ski champion for whom 'Time was the father of all things.' His life is dominated by the clock and by an order which he cannot find outside his self-created world. Everything in Taads' life is calculated. He reads, smokes, sleeps by the clock. Once a week he cooks seven portions of food for himself and one for a guest; if there is no guest, his dog gets the extra portion. He is haunted by loneliness, self-detestation, insomnia, and misanthropy.

> God sounds like an answer - that is what is most pernicious about the word. It has so often been used as an answer. He should have had a name that sounded like a question. I never asked to be alone in the world, but then, nobody does.

In the final section, in 1973, after a scene of unemotional lovemaking with a stranger, Inni meets a man with an "introspective monk's face" at an Asian gallery in Amsterdam. Inni learns that the idiosyncratic man is Philip Taads, half-Indonesian, unloved, who was deserted by his father Arnold many years before and now lives a monastic existence completely within himself, hating himself and awaiting his own deliverance. Inni becomes aware that he is very much a part of his world:

> As far as he could see, the world was moving, in an orderly capitalist fashion, toward a logical, perhaps provisional, perhaps permanent end. When the dollar fell, gold rose; 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 crashing into a tree, though admittedly you needed a car.

Philip Taads' purchase of a rare tea bowl from the Asian gallery is the catalyst in his life. Inni and the gallery owner are invited to a ritual tea ceremony, in which the silence, the placement of the tea objects, and the gestures during the ceremony become part of an advance requiem.

The description of the tea ceremony is only one of many memorable passages in a magnificent and unforgettable novel. There are many subtle ecclesiastic allusions throughout the book. Inni makes love with Petra, his aunt's helper. "On this rock, this soft round rock, he thought later, he had built his church." At mass, the host on Petra's tongue parallels Petra's fellatial taking of Inni's seed a few hours earlier. There is a passionate dinner discussion about the tyranny of the Christian church, the existence of and breach with God, and the possessiveness of Catholicism. A crucial point in the novel involves the appearance of three doves, one dead, one live, and one dazed. And there is a strong parallel between the Japanese tea bowl and the Eucharistic chalice. "If Christ had been born in China or Japan, tea would now be turned into blood every day on five continents. But in the tea ceremony it was not so much the tea that mattered, he realized, as the way in which you drank it." Nooteboom goes far beyond the obvious in his spare prose and richly drawn characters. In this extraordinary, deeply felt novel, he reminds us that life, however capricious and seemingly meaningless, is for those who, although seemingly detached, have the courage to remain alive.

Understandably, much of the literary success of the above Nooteboom novels is a result of the exceptional translation skills of Adrienne Dixon, whose sensitivity for the nuances of English is also shown in her recent translation of Harry Mulisch's *Last Call*. Despite very occasional Britishisms, she produces an 'international' translation which reads smoothly, seems idiomatically correct, and has a sense of inevitability. Not surprisingly, she has won the Martinus Nijhoff Prize for Translations.

J. Bernlef: *Chimères*. Roman traduit du néerlandais par Philippe Noble. Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1988.

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Chimères est le premier roman de J. Bernlef qui ait été traduit en français. L'initiative de cette heureuse traduction tient non seulement au fait que ce livre, dans sa version originale, avait connu un immense succès en Hollande, au point d'avoir été porté à l'écran. La diffusion de cette oeuvre traduite en français marque aussi l'intérêt relativement récent que le grand public porte à cette terrible et incurable maladie, dite erronenent "des vieux", qu'on appelle la maladie d'Alzheimer. Jadis on disait des vieux qu'ils souffraient de sénilité, ou qu'ils retombaient en enfance, comme si les deux bouts de la boucle qui nous accroche à la vie se rejoignaient à l'aube de la mort. On sait aujourd'hui que les symptômes déroutants de la maladie d'Alzheimer ne sont pas le lot de tous, et peuvent même se manifester insidieusement chez des êtres qui ont à peine quarante ans, en pleine force de l'âge!

Le personnage central de *Chimères*, qui narre la brutale évolution de sa maladie, s'appelle Maarten Klein, un homme encore robuste de soixante-et-onze ans, un intellectuel qui a fait son droit, et qui a connu une belle carrière dans un organisme international. Retraité, il coule une paisible existence, en compagnie de sa femme Véra, à Gloucester, petite localité sise sur la côte de l'Atlantique, non loin de Boston. C'est là, un jour, que Maarten s'aperçoit, sans d'abord s'en inquiéter, de légères pertes de mémoire. Inexorablement des souvenirs s'estompent, comme si on venait tout à coup d'occulter les fenêtres de la mémoire qui donnent sur le passé et même sur le présent. L'ordre logique des événements commence à disparaître. Une oscillation irritante entre des bribes du passé et la réalité du présent s'installe. Tantôt Maarten revit avec une effrayante clarté le passé du bureau, des collègues. Tantôt il se transporte en un temps où ses enfants, Kitty et Fred, revenaient de l'école. Mais ce n'est ni l'imagination ni la rêverie qui lui font remonter le temps, mais une lente détérioration de ses facultés mnémoniques. Les jalons du temps et de l'espace se brouillent de plus en plus. A côté de lui se tient, d'abord désemparée, puis désespérée, Véra, vieil lie, impuissante. Et bientôt s'estomperont sous le regard hébété de Maarten les traits familiers de cette femme qu'il a tant aimée, qu'il continue d'aimer, en dépit des interférences temporelles ou spatiales.

"Je me sens comme un bateau, ... (dit Maarten), un voilier en panne dans une accalmie. Soudain, voilà une saute de vent et je me remets à avancer. Le monde recommence à avoir prise sur moi et je participe à son mouvement" (p.82-3). Ce sont là les premiers spasmes d'une mémoire moribonde. Maarten est engagé sur une pente qui le mène au néant de sa vie intelligente et intelligible. Sa compréhension du monde lui glisse insensiblement entre les doigts. Il confond son enfance et son présent, parfois littéralement aspiré par le souvenir du père qu'il aimait, qu'il admirait. Le calvaire de Maarten s'effrite rapidement dans le non-sens. Et à la fin du roman, Maarten, confiné dans une clinique, n'est plus que l'ombre d'une conscience parmi d'autres ombres, et la parole narrative, elle aussi, s'enlise dans le tourbillon vertigineux de la totale confusion: "Re-