

SOME ASPECTS OF SYMBOLISM IN CERTAIN NIJHOFF POEMS:

"HET LICHT", "HET STEENEN KINDJE", "KLEINE PRÉLUDE VAN RAVEL"

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That the attempt to describe movements in twentieth century poetry may be a dangerous task indeed is pointed out in Lehmann's study of Symbolism.¹ On the other hand, critics such as Anna Balakian, C.E. Bowra, Hugo Friedrich, and Edmund Wilson² have argued just as convincingly that the whole development of European poetry of the last hundred years has certain common elements, although these traits may manifest themselves differently according to the individual authors examined. It should be obvious that the true poet can neither be completely imitative — the work of epigones has never survived the test of time — nor can he ignore the tradition within which he is writing. Consequently, it was almost impossible for the well-read poet of the early twentieth century to ignore the long tradition of Romantic and Symbolist poetry that preceded him. He had to come to terms with this tradition by either rejecting it or assimilating it; the latter was the case with Nijhoff.

Nijhoff, who lived from 1894 to 1953, and is generally considered to be one of the greatest Dutch poets of the twentieth century, is a good example of a poet whose work still cannot be labelled as being the product of a particular school or movement. Part of this stems from the time of his creative activity; he first published in 1916, and he is generally regarded as not belonging to the avant-garde "generation of 1910", which included such innovators as Hendrick Marsman and Paul van Ostaïjen, nor is he considered to be a traditionalist writing in the idiom of the "Tachtigers" or "Poets of the Eighties" that preceded him. Generally he is seen as a figure who bridged the gap between the traditionalists and the innovators, but at various times he or aspects of his work have had the following labels affixed: classical, baroque, romantic, romantic realist, *parmassien*, symbolist, aestheticist, decadent, expressionist, realist, cubist, surrealist, magic realist, representative of the "Neue Sachlichkeit", unanimist, existentialist, and new animist.³ It is not my intention here to try to fit Nijhoff or his works into any of these categories, nor do I wish to argue that the three poems that I intend to discuss are symbolist. What I do wish to show is that in these three poems Nijhoff, who admired the works of the Symbolists, expressed similar ideas to theirs on the nature of poetry and the poet.

Since the Romantics tended to elevate poetry to a religion and the symbolists, who were unable

to accept traditional transcendental explanations of human existence, substituted poetry for religion, one of the main themes in their lyrics is the nature and function of poetry. If such an emphasis is placed on these concerns, it follows that the poet will also examine the creative process and his own role as a poet within society. The poet of the early twentieth century shared these concerns, partly because he felt himself to be more and more isolated from the rest of society and felt called upon to justify his existence as a poet. Quite often he did this by casting himself in the role of a seer, a priest, or a prophet, in other words, as an individual who has some access to transcendental truths that elude the rest of mankind. At other times he presented himself as a martyr who suffered and sacrificed himself in the hope that his readers might find some consolation for their own sufferings in the description of his torments. In either case the picture of the poet that emerges is one of a unique individual who stands isolated because of the mission with which he has been entrusted and one who comforts himself with the thought that the recording of the torments forced on him by his isolation may console others in their suffering. Within our culture the apotheosis of the martyr is, of course, Jesus Christ and the poet's identification with Christ is the theme of the first poem that I want to examine.

"Het licht" first appeared in the collection published in 1916, entitled *De wandelaar*. In the first stanza of the poem the creation of colours is described in language reminiscent of *Genesis 1*; colours are created by the dividing or refracting of light. This separation of chaos into ordered elements is seen as God's creative process, of course, but by the end of the stanza the poet's act of creation, described as his soul's breaking when it utters words, is meant to be analogous to the cosmic process at the beginning of the poem. The word "breekt" suggests painful sensation associated with separation and the act of giving birth. The second stanza develops the idea of the creative process further and puts it into a religious context when the idea of martyrdom and rebirth is stressed; only he who allows himself to die, or is prepared to die, can earn life. Through the description of blood dripping down the nails and the echo of *Luke 22: 19-20* in the last line of the second stanza an identification with Jesus Christ is

achieved. The sacramental aspect of the poet's martyrdom is underlined by the allusion to Christ's words at the Last Supper.

In the last tercet of the sonnet there is once again a reference to Christ's passion in that the soul of the poet is bound to, and whipped on, the stake. The image is of the poet's soul writing poetry, breaking itself in love and uttering words; it adds another element to the image of the last line of the first quatrain, and, additionally, the final line of the poem explicitly states that this is the poet's duty as a human being. The pain of suffering that accompanies the creative process and the redemptive quality of the result of this process are expressed by references to Christ's passion and crucifixion.

In summary, then, the main thoughts developed in this poem concern the poet and his poetry. The poet must be prepared to die to be reborn, and he is like Christ in that he lets himself be tortured and crucified, so that his poetry may have redemptive quality for others. The identification of the poet with Christ is not surprising in the light of Symbolist theory about the function of the poet and poetry, where the poet was seen as a mediator between transcendental reality and the rest of humanity. According to Baudelaire, all things were symbols, or at least potential symbols, if not of God, then certainly of this transcendental reality, and it was the poet's task to relay his special insights to the rest of mankind.⁴ This would tend to set the poet apart from his fellowmen and he would have to suffer because of his isolation. Poets influenced by the French Symbolists such as Alexander Blok, Stefan George, and Yeats also stressed the fact that the poet was a seer and perhaps a martyr: in fact, Blok and George saw themselves as undergoing the same agonies of the Cross as Christ. As far as Nijhoff was concerned, poetry had a religious function; he felt that "since the disappearance of the great philosophies and the great religions, there has been only art to show us a reality above this world and its mundane nature. Consequently, writing becomes a form of positive mysticism. The word of the poet conceals a final form of religion in the etymological sense of the word, a religion of reality, a sensory incarnational of what has been seen."⁵

If we turn to the second poem, the "Kleine prélude van Ravel", which appeared later, in 1922, we notice that another notion associated with the Symbolists is introduced, namely that of the independence of the poem from the poet. The poem is a triptych in which the first and last parts, stanzas 1 to 6 and 11 to 17 illustrate the theoretical section in the middle. The central part is important for our topic, and in this connection it is interesting to note that this section of four stanzas is set apart whenever the poem has been published. Nijhoff himself wrote Dirk Corter on March 9, 1922, when he sent the poem for publication: "I would prefer as many couplets to be printed on a page as there are in the manuscript. That way the inserted formulation stands out more and the last couplet does also."⁶

In subsequent publications of the poem the middle part was separated from the rest by either spaces or asterisks.

The two types of art examined in this poem are that produced by the gypsy and that of the virtuoso. In the case of the gypsy the effect and, implicitly, the nature of his art are discussed. We are told that the art of the gypsy affects the emotions of his audience, since it "touches our hearts" and "carries us off, out of ourselves to a mystery." The process is not a rational one since the music causes the listener to lose control over himself. Perhaps Nijhoff is also thinking of a Dionysian experience since the pronomial adjective "our", which appears three times in stanza 7, makes one think of a communal loss of the self and "being carried off to a mystery" points in that direction also. This notion still has somewhat of a negative quality; Nijhoff did not see such a "being carried off" as the most important function of art, and in this sense stanza 7 is an introduction to the following stanzas, where the art of the virtuoso is discussed — an art form which Nijhoff saw as more important than the former.

Stanzas 8 and 9 deal with the nature of the art of the virtuoso, rather than just the effect of his art, as was the case with the mention of the gypsy; the former *discloses* mysteries. The sequence of ideas is the following: the virtuoso hears God's music in everything, he creates music out of whatever he touches, and transforms into his instrument whatever is hard and lifeless. Important in stanza 9 is the notion that this transformation of a hard and lifeless substance into an instrument can occur with any substance in nature; nothing needs to be cast aside. It is not surprising that in the following two images this act is compared to that of creation; just as God created man from dust (*Genesis 2:7*) and allowed Moses to let water come from rock (*Exodus 17:6*), the true artist can create music out of any elements.

The image of the virtuoso musician that Nijhoff evokes in stanzas 8 and 9 is then applied to poetry in stanza 10. Just as the virtuoso can hear music in any lifeless object and thus create music with it, the poet, who hears the possibility of poetry in every word, can create or give life to a poem with language. Again, this is a notion that originates with the Symbolists, especially in Baudelaire's writings.⁷ Also important is the idea that the poet's role in this creative process is that of an assistant or midwife; he hears potential births of literature and initiates the creative process. What happens with this literature is not discussed in this particular poem, but presumably the literature that is produced after this initiation becomes independent. The concept of the poem that takes its own initiation in hand after this initiation is a central principle in Symbolist poetry, which Nijhoff admired very much at the time of writing of the "Prélude". As A.L. Sötemann states in a synopsis of Nijhoff's aesthetic theories at this time, in a slightly different context: "At a certain moment words, linguistic and prosodic forms take the initiative, assume a creative power emanating from themselves.

The poet disappears from his poem and the resulting object may transcend the limits and the human limits of the person who wrote it."⁸

The creative process is also the subject of "Het steenen kindje", written and published along with the previous poem in *Vormen* in 1924. As far as the form of the poem is concerned, it has the traditional ballad form used by Francois Villon: three stanzas with the same rhyme scheme followed by a shorter envoy, where every stanza concludes with a refrain, usually an identical line. Nijhoff has varied the traditional form since the last line of each stanza concludes with a refrain, usually an identical line. Nijhoff has varied the traditional form since the last line of each stanza is not completely identical to the others. He wrote about the poem to P.N. van Eyck:

I write all of my poems directly from life, at random and from my heart. I write then...literally in tears, in an indescribable excitement. Then it is left alone for some time, sometimes, usually, for three or four years...."Het steenen kindje" had to wait the longest (six years). It literally obsessed me. For months it caused me to sleep badly until I could finally set it free in the ballad form of Villon.⁹

The first stanza can be seen as taking place on a realistic level; after he hears some music outside, the narrator joins his companions at the windowsill to see some travelling musicians playing on a snow covered square with a child staring at them nearby. In the second stanza the first person singular is used instead of the first person plural in the first stanza, and here the last line of the first stanza is re-interpreted; the child that stands staring beside the musicians appears to be a stone cherub. As a result stanza 1 has to be re-interpreted also in that we are not just given a neutral description of reality but an interpreted vision of reality. A transition from empirical reality to the description of a vision has thus been made and this process is continued until the stone cherub has left the fountain and started to stare at the poet. Now we are at his level of experience, and watch the child moving towards the poet and addressing him as if he were its mother; until in the last stanza the poet talks about a child within himself.

If we examine the relation between the "stone child", "the son within myself" and the "you" that is addressed in the last stanza, we must conclude that he "you" addressed and "the stone child" are identical in the poet's experience. As far as he is concerned the child that is outside is like the child within himself. The duality between "the stone child" and the "son within myself" is the theme of the poem — a problem that can be solved by determining how these two aspects can be brought together so that a fusion between them can take place. "The stone child" only has a form, a body, but not a soul, and begs the poet for a soul, for life. The poet interprets the child's staring as reproachful because he is unable to breathe life into it. "The son within myself", on the other hand, forms an opposite pole to the child, in that it has a spirit or soul but no body and the poet is incapable of giving it a substance, of giving birth to it. Because the poet is incapable of breathing life into the inanimate child without, or giving birth or a body to the poem within himself, he symbolizes his incapability of writing a poem.

In conclusion we can say that Nijhoff in these three poems voices some of the same concerns as the Symbolists. He regards the poet's role as that of a seer and a creator. He feels that the poet must write and that his writing may have a redemptive quality. He also believes that the true poet can create poetry out of any raw material, and that once a creative process has been initiated by the poet, the poetry created by him assumes a creative power emanating from itself.

HET LICHT¹⁰

Het Licht, Gods witte licht, breekt zich in kleuren:
Kleuren zijn daden van het licht dat breekt.
Het leven breekt zich in het bont gebeuren,
En mijn ziel breekt zich als ze woorden spreekt.
Slechts die zich sterven laat, kan 't leven beuren:
O zie mijn bloed dat langs de spijkers leekt!
Mijn raam is open, open zijn mijn deuren -
Hier is mijn hart, hier is mijn lichaam: breekt!
De grond is zacht van lente. Door de boomen
Weeft zich een waas van groen, en menschen
komen
Wandelen langs de vijvers in het gras -
Naakt aan een paal geslagen door de koorden,
Ziel, die zichzelf brak in liefde en woorden:
Dit zijn de daden waar ik mensch voor was.

KLEINE PRELUDE VAN RAVEL

Langs de twee coniferen naar
Het smalle rozenboompje, was
Met kamerschermen een boudoir
Geïmproviseerd op het gras.
Kaptafel, spiegels, dozen, flacons,
Een waaier tusschen een theeservies,
Een beker bloemen, lampions,
Een masker op een spies.
De danseres, nog bijna kind,
Zit op haar afgegleden shawl,
Buigt zich over haar voet, en bindt
Zich vaster de sandaal.
Terzijde wacht, gehurkt, een man
In wijde kleeren op een stoof:
Hij heeft het peer-hoog voorhoofd van
Een Chineesch filosoof.
Hij wacht, met bril en roode fez,
Bij zijn orkestrion bereid,
Waarmee hij wals, pavane of jazz
Evengoed begeleidt.
Dit zelfgemaakte clavecin
Verbergt in zijn polyphonie
Al de mazurka's van Chopin,
Cakewalks van Debussy.

Ik heb respect voor den tzigiaan
Die met zoo'n kunst ons hart ontroert
Dat hij ons, uit onszelf vandaan,
Naar een geheim ontvoert;
Maar méér nog voor den virtuoos
Die, waar hij aanraakt, musiceert,

Die wat hard is en levenloos
 Tot instrument verkeert.
 Hij hoort muziek in elk ding Gods,
 Niets werpt hij waardeloos terzij;
 Zoo steeg eens water uit een rots,
 En 't menschenkind uit klei.
 De dichter hoort in ieder woord
 Geboorten van literatuur:
 Wie oor heeft om te hooren hoort
 Muziek in de natuur.

Den dag lang zag ik den muzikant
 Het huis door sluipen in en uit;
 Nu wacht hij plechtig triomfant,
 Temidden van zijn buit.
 Een cythertje, een bazartrumpet,
 Een oversnaarde cocosdop,
 Twee deksels, en een castagnet,
 Een stok met leeren knop,
 Een zilv'ren bol, een plat stuk hout,
 Halfvolle flesschen en een ring -
 Hetgeen zorgvuldig opgetouwd
 Aan kleine galgen hing.
 Hij lacht wanneer de danseres
 Tenger tusschen de spiegels, naakt,
 Met godenmasker en bloedrood mes
 Een wreeden danspas maakt.
 Hij lacht en helpt bij haar toilet,
 Bindt haar de druiven aan het oor,
 Treedt naast haar aan den spiegel, zet
 Een kandelaar er voor.
 - Reeds is het park met violet
 Schmerend avondlicht vervult,
 Reeds wacht, in de warande, het
 Publiek met ongeduld.
 't Fonteintje, achter 't grasveld, spuit
 Het water in den vijver terug,
 Een vroege nachtegaal zingt uit
 De boomen bij de brug -.

HET STEENEN KINDJE

Buiten de herberg waar we bleven
 In 't oude stadje aan den Rijn
 Begon des nachts muziek te beven.
 Wij zetten ons, achter 't gordijn,
 Met kandelaars op het kozijn:
 Reizende muzikanten waren
 Aan 't spelen op 't besneeuwde plein,
 En bij hen stond een kind te staren -
 Maar toen ik nader acht ging geven,
 Was het de steenen cherubijn
 Die zich, als smeltend losgeheven,
 Had vrij gemaakt van de fontein -
 De fluit hief in het maan licht zijn
 Roep tusschen rits'lende gitaren
 En zwol terug in het refrein -
 Het kind begon mij aan te staren -
 Toen kwam het naar mijn venster zweven:
 Ik voelde hoe zijn naakt en klein
 Lichaam dicht aan mijn borst gedreven
 Sidderde van ontspannen pijn -
 Er trilde langs mijn wang een rein

Koud kindermondje, en in mijn haren
 Woelde zijn handje - O moeder mijn,
 Smeekte 't, en bleef mistroostig staren -
 O zoontje in me, o woord ongeschreven,
 O vleeschlooze, o kon ik u baren -
 Den nood van ongeboren leven
 Wreekt gij met dit verwijtend staren.

THE LIGHT

The light, God's white light, breaks into colours:
 Colours are deeds of the light that breaks.
 Life breaks into colourful activity
 And my soul breaks when it utters words.
 Only he who is prepared to die can earn life:
 Oh, see my blood that drips along the nails!
 My window is open, open are my doors—
 Here is my heart, here is by body: break!
 The ground is soft with spring. Through the trees
 A haze of green is woven, and people come
 walking
 Along the ponds in the lawns—
 Bound and whipped naked on the stake by ropes,
 Soul that broke in love and into words:
 These are the deeds for which I was a man.

LITTLE PRELUDE BY RAVEL

Beside the two conifers toward
 The slender rosebush a boudoir
 Had been improvised with screens
 On the grass.
 Dressing-table, mirrors, boxes, bottles,
 A fan in the midst of the tea-set,
 A vase of flowers, Chinese lanterns,
 And a mask on a spear.
 The dancer, almost still a child,
 Sits on her shawl, that has slipped down,
 Bends over her foot, and ties
 Her sandal tight.
 At the side waits, squatting, a man
 In loose clothes on a foot-warmer:
 He has the high pear-shaped forehead
 Of a Chinese sage.
 He waits, with spectacles and a red fez
 Ready beside his orchestrion,
 With which he can accompany equally well
 A waltz, pavane, or jazz.
 This home-made harpsichord
 Contains within its polyphony
 All the mazurkas of Chopin
 And Debussy's cakewalks.

I respect the gypsy
 Who touches our hearts with such an art
 That he leads us out of ourselves
 To a mystery.
 But even more do I respect the virtuoso
 Who, wherever he touches, makes music
 And transforms what is hard and lifeless
 Into an instrument.

He hears music in all God's things
And throws nothing away as worthless:
In this way water rose from the rock once
And man from clay.

The poet hears in every word
Births of literature:
He who has ears to hear hears
Music in nature.

All day long I saw the musician
Sneaking in and out of the house:
Now, dignified and triumphant,
He waits amidst his loot.

A cyther, a carnival trumpet,
A coconut with strings,
Two lids and castanets,
A cane with a leather knob.
A silver ball, a flat piece of wood,
Half filled bottles and a ring—
All carefully strung together,
Suspended from little frames.

He laughs when the dancer,
Slight, between the mirrors, naked,
With a god's mask and a blood-red knife,
Makes a ferocious looking dance step.

He laughs and helps her dress,
Ties grapes to her ears,
Steps beside her to the mirror, puts
A candlestick in front of it.

—Already the park is filled with
Violet dusky evening light,
Already the public is waiting, impatiently,
On the verandah.

The fountain, at the back of the lawn, sprays
Water back into the pond,
An early nightingale sings
From the trees near the bridge.

THE STONE CHILD

Outside the inn where we were staying
In the small old town on the Rhine
Music began to vibrate at night.
We placed ourselves, behind the drapes,
Candlesticks on the window sill:
Travelling musicians were playing
Outside on the snow covered square,
And near them stood a small child staring.

But when I paid closer attention,
It was the stone cherub which had,
As if melting, separated and
Then freed itself from the fountain—
In the moonlight the flute raised its
Call above the strumming of guitars,
And then swelled back in the refrain—
The child now began to stare at me.

And then it hovered to my window:
I felt how its naked and small
Body floating and then pressing against
My chest, shuddered with eased pain—
I felt beside my cheek a pure
Cold child's mouth quiver, and in my hair the
Pulling of its hand— Oh mother mine,

It begged and stared despondently.
Oh son within myself, oh word unwritten,
Oh fleshless one, that I could give you birth—
The need of unborn life is avenged
By thee with this reproachful staring.

NOTES

A.G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France, 1885-1895*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), pp. 316f.

²See Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement* (New York, 1967), C.E. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London, 1962), Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (Hamburg, 1965), Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York, 1948).

³A.L. Sötemann, "Non-spectacular Modernism: Martinus Nijhoff's Poetry in its European Context," Francis Bulhof, ed. *Nijhoff, Van Ostaijen, De Stijl: Modernism in the Netherlands and Belgium in the First Quarter of the 20th Century* (The Hague, 1976), p. 97.

⁴See Lehmann, p. 260.

⁵Sötemann, p. 108. Cf. Karel Meeuwesse, ed. *Een stoet van beelden zag ik langs mij gaan. Schrijversgestalten door Martinus Nijhoff* (The Hague, 1970), pp. 12f.

⁶K. Meeuwesse, "Nijhoffs 'Kleine prélude van Ravel'," *Raam*, 36 (June 1967), p. 50.

⁷Cf. Lehmann, p. 265.

⁸Sötemann, p. 108. W. Spillebeen—*De geboorte van het stenen kindje: Thematische analyse van het scheppend werk van Martinus Nijhoff* (Nijmegen, 1976), p. 104— completely misses the point of the poem when he argues that the gypsy is the great poet and the virtuoso the minor poet.

⁹Verzen en vezels, *Maatstaf* 5 (1957), 514.

¹⁰All poems are from Martinus Nijhoff, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, ed. Gerrit Kamphuis (Amsterdam, 1976).