

"FATHERLAND" AND "MOTHER TONGUE" IN NIJHOFF'S POETRY

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The concepts "fatherland" and "mother tongue" appear, directly and indirectly, quite frequently in Nijhoff's work. Unlike concepts such as "woman", "heaven" and "earth", the concepts "fatherland" and "mother tongue" do not undergo a radical change of meaning in the course of Nijhoff's poetic career.

It is important to qualify at the outset both terms under discussion. Under "fatherland" I include, in addition to the traditional meaning of "the land where one is born", the concept "land of one's fathers", by which I mean Holland not so much in the socio-political as in the purely cultural sense of the word. One could say that to Nijhoff "Holland" means the place where one "belongs", the place with which one can totally and unconditionally identify; thus it also stands for the earth, the physical, this life, reality in the most basic sense of the word.

To a certain extent the term "mother tongue" is related to the concept "fatherland". In addition to the similarity between the two terms, however, there is an important difference. "Mother" and "mother tongue", unlike "fatherland", also imply the very special and personal meaning these terms have for Nijhoff, as is apparent from the very first to the very last poem he wrote. Nijhoff dedicated many poems, and also longer works like his well-known Bible plays, to the memory and honor of his mother. It will thus be obvious that "mother tongue" to Nijhoff meant much more than "Dutch". Yet in spite of this very personal meaning, "mother tongue" also has a much more universal meaning. It also means the language of the people, the "volkstaal", and in this meaning the term "mother tongue" is, of course, comparable to "fatherland" as explained above. In this sense, "mother tongue", like "fatherland" is identified with the genuine, the earthy, the natural, the real world, i.e. in principle everything that is opposed to concepts which relate to the elevated, the sublime, the supernatural.

Concerning the term "fatherland", there are works of Nijhoff's which I do not intend to discuss extensively, but which should be mentioned, namely his so-called patriotic poems and articles, works in which the poet's loyalty to Holland is explicitly described. In these poems his love and respect for Holland actually form the subject matter; "fatherland" and "mother tongue" do not function as technically constituting factors of the poetic product - they are purely nominal and can, theoretically speaking, be replaced by other "material". The fact that he wrote certain poems and articles with patriotic themes may or may not prove that he was a loyal, patriotic citizen. Such poems are 'Het jaar 1572. Aan Juliana, prinses van Oranje, op 30 april 1934' (The Year 1572. To Juliana, Princess of Orange, on April 30, 1934); "Bij het graf van de Nederlandse onbekende soldaat, gevallen in de meidagen van 1940" (At

the Grave of the Dutch unknown Soldier, killed in May, 1940); "Wij zijn bevrijd" (We are liberated). It is certain that they say nothing about the poet's ability to use these themes poetically; they may, for instance, even have been written on commission, just as his religious works were frequently commissioned. Religion in these poems, and patriotism in the other poems just mentioned, only, or at best primarily, serve to convey certain more or less interesting information; they operate on a superficial, non-poetic level. To explain what I mean, I should like to quote from one of the many articles Nijhoff wrote on this and related topics.

Nijhoff wrote the article in question in 1921 in response to the recent publication of a collection of poems. In it he explains what he understands by the double function of words. Language, he reasons, can be a bridge, a connection, an instrument which conveys ideas from one person to another. On the other hand, words can also be an independent, autonomous medium by means of which one can, as Nijhoff would typically say, "objectify" a psychic state. In this way words are comparable to marble or sound which are also materials or vehicles for expressing oneself artistically. Nijhoff calls this special quality the second nature of words, a quality which, according to him, enables words to lead a life of their own. The relationship between these two qualities, the informative and the artistic, is more or less arbitrary: it does not matter, Nijhoff states, whether Hamlet, Pierrot or Faust really existed or not; we know them better than many people we meet daily.

In this way words can attain a super-real, a super-human value, a divine quality which is the essence of real art. Words thus used (and it is the specific talent and task of the poet to discover the laws that govern this deeper potential of words), accumulate meanings consisting of "a thousand elements of centuries old memories, associations and names." A person who understands these laws is a poet, a finder, a *trouvère* in the real sense of the word. A poet does not merely represent or describe reality, that which we already know; he creates new understandings, new meanings which we could not have discovered by other than artistic means. In reading Nijhoff's poetry one should keep in mind the meaning Nijhoff gives to the poetic word, not only the typically poetic word, but also, and even especially, what one might call very common or everyday words.

What I have said about Nijhoff's conception of the poetic word in general certainly also applies to the words "fatherland" and "mother tongue". Both terms have more than the usual literal and even figurative meaning. They can be said to have a very specifically Nijhovan meaning. To summarize, "fatherland" refers both to "Holland" in the normal sense of the word as the country where a Hollander comes from, and to this world, our home in a more universal sense of the word, the place where one belongs. "Mother tongue" refers both to the Dutch language and to the language one's mother speaks, in the broad sense of the word. Both terms or concepts could be related, horizontally to terms which have similar Nijhovan connotations, and vertically to indicate concepts which have direct or indirect religious and philosophical

overtone, as well as a meaning of a much more personal nature. Both words are also indicative of Nijhoff's belief in and respect for universal cosmic laws.

In *De Wandelaar*, his first book, published when he was twenty-two, there is a poem which, although it is called "Holland", pertains to much more than the poet's fatherland in the traditional sense of the word. It seems to demonstrate exactly what I am trying to explain. After a description of the sky, which he directly identifies with heaven in the traditional sense, the action moves to the earth, which is presented as the source and giver of life. Together, the sky and the earth represent complete contentment. The poet then describes a spiralling inward movement: the evening light enters a home, exposing some simple pieces of furniture which the poet personifies by making them think of each other. In the last stanza the "I" explains what godliness means to him:

't Eenvoudig leven Gods is diep en klaar:
Een man in blauwe kiel en een vrouw in een
Geruite rok en witte boezelaar
(God's simple life is deep and clear:
A man in a blue shirt and a woman in a
Checked skirt and white blouse)

It seems to me that this description speaks for itself: there is a direct identification of Holland and all it stands for (the earth, simple pure people, etc.) with God and, indirectly, happiness. The concept "mother" is implied, if not explicitly included, by means of the image of an "I" lying at Holland's breast, drinking like a child. Unlike Marsman's poem "Herinnering aan Holland":

Denkend aan Holland
Zie ik brede rivieren
(Thinking of Holland
I see broad rivers),

which in my judgement does not contain any profound symbolic meaning, Nijhoff gives every word in his poem a double function. The identification of "fatherland" and "home", relatively unimportant in *De Wandelaar*, will gradually become the most dominant if not the sole theme in Nijhoff's later work.

The movement from the abstract and sublime to the concrete and earthy, a spiralling movement from some vague spatial vacuum to the center or source of life, is also found in at least one poem in *Vormen*, "Langs een Wereld" (Along a world). In this poem there is also the confrontation of the abstract and the concrete followed by the approach and the inward movement. Here too the idea of total peace when the two extremes meet is suggested. A man who has wandered all over the world looks through the window of a house and sees a woman who is apparently aware of a presence just outside her window. The inward movement

appears in the desire of the two to come together; something they cannot do:

Maar reeds waren wij voor elkaar onbereikbaar
 Elk naar zijn eenzaam leven ontweken
 (Already we were unable to meet
 Each withdrawn to his own lonely life)

In *Nieuwe Gedichten*, Nijhoff's most important book of poems in so far as it can be said to supply answers to the poet's questions or a solution to his quest for "paradise", there are very few of the fifteen poems which do not directly or indirectly relate to the two fundamental concepts here under examination. "Fatherland" in its varying forms appears in more than half of the poems, and "mother tongue" is found now more, now less explicitly, in at least a third of them; sometimes the two concepts appear together in one poem. Separately and in combination they give expression to the idea of coming home, of arriving, of finding happiness; discovering heavenly bliss, ironically, on earth, in one's own familiar surroundings. We always find the spiralling motion from heaven (in a very traditional sense) down to earth, one's home, one's fatherland and one's mother tongue; warm, fertile soil and womanhood consistently mean perfect bliss; in this meaning the two terms are completely assimilated to each other.

This discovery is made, perhaps too late, by Sebastian, the fourth century Christian martyr. When he arises after his first death and is about to cross the river of death, symbolized by a Dutch polder canal, he looks through the window of a cottage in a typical North Holland landscape and observes a woman at the point of giving birth. The peace in the room is described thus:

Die stilte was de stilte niet des doods,
 die stilte daar was aards en warm, was zwanger,
 stilte als een eerste dag, en daarin stond
 Sebastiaan, de schaduw, zeer bevreemd
 dat hij, toen hij in leven was, zijn hoop
 gesteld had op een hoger heil dan dit
 thuiskomen in een slapend vruchtbegin
 (That silence was not the silence of death,
 that silence was earthy and warm, was pregnant,
 silence like a first day, and in this silence
 stood Sebastian, the shade, quite amazed
 that he, while still in this life, had put
 his hope on a higher bliss than this
 coming home in a sleeping womb).

The poet's conclusion is that if God's mercy were greater than His law, He would allow Sebastian to be born again into this world via the woman (his potential mother) whom he had seen through the window, rather than letting him go to heaven. When a child is born the next day, it is described as an infant whose appearance makes one think of blue skies, milk and fruit and running water, in short, of a paradisiacal state.

The same or a similar discovery is made by the soldier-poet in "De Soldaat en de Zee" (The Soldier and the Sea), who at one time had looked for inspiration from the gods that supposedly lived in Elysium, somewhere across the ocean. Just like Sebastian, the soldier very consciously experiences the moment when he realizes that "in space" one can expect to see nothing but space:

terwijl mijn blik in het ruim
niets dan het niets ontmoette
(While my gaze into space
saw nothing but space).

At this moment he turns his back upon the sea; then follows, in the briefest terms, the moment of Nijhoff's "wending", expressed in Nijhovian poetic terms: "Ik keerde, ik zag mijn land" (I turned, I saw my land). And then he knew:

bevolkt met vaderlijk bloed
ontwaakt men als kind der aarde,
erkent als zijn kostbaarst goed
de taal die een moeder bewaarde
(engendered by fatherly blood
one awakens as child of this earth
and recognizes as one's most precious possession
one's mother tongue).

In "Het Kind en Ik" (The Child and I), a very despondent poet discovers a similar truth while sitting, of all places, on the bank of a "sloot" (a ditch) covered with "kroos" (duck-weed). Staring into the water, he sees heaven reflected on the black muddy bottom of the ditch, and then he realizes that from now on this is where he will have to go for inspiration: to the very heart of his own land.

In "Aan een Graf" (At a Grave), the integration of heaven with an imperfect but good and desirable life in this world reaches a climax when earth and mother are literally identified. The "I", presumably the poet, is at his mother's graveside. When he speaks, he addresses the earth and his mother simultaneously and recognizes them as the source and condition of new life: "k Sta aan je graf als jij eens aan mijn wieg" (I am standing at your grave as you once stood at my cradle). By this he suggests that man has conquered death the moment he realizes that without death, life is not possible.

A similar assimilation of heaven and earth, indirectly expressed in terms of "mother tongue" and "fatherland", is found in the final poem in the series of eight sonnets in the *Nieuwe Gedichten*. The identification of "moeder", symbolizing a happy but idealized past, and "vrouw", representing the realistic present, is given form in the title of the poem "De Moeder de Vrouw" (literally "The Mother the Woman," which makes very little sense in English but is more understandable if not totally clear

in Dutch). Parallel to and identified with these two terms are "heaven" and "earth". The woman's voice first seems to come from heaven, "een stem uit de oneindigheid die psalmen zong en die zijn oren deed klinken" (a voice from infinity which was singing psalms and which made his ears ring). In fact, however, it comes from a woman who is piloting a ship down a river in a typically Dutch landscape, which is even identified by name: the Waal river near Zaltbommel. The woman could have been the observer's mother and is clearly identified with her. Through her position in the middle of the river, she also connects or identifies "two sides", which formerly had seemed enemies but now prove to be inseparable. The observer himself is lying flat on the grassy river bank, thus serving as an interpreter of the situation. He is fulfilling the typical function of the poet: to observe and give form or expression to what he sees better than other people. In this case he sees that the past, i.e. a distant, romantic heaven identified with "mother", cannot exist without the present, here represented by "woman" and "fatherland". By expressing this in the form of a poem, the poet has fulfilled his ultimate calling, in Nijhoff's words: to be a receptor and bring together the sublime infinite and the finite earth.