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AN ANALYSIS OF "AD INFINITUM" AS AN INTRODUCTION
TO NIJHOFF'S POETRY

M.A. Bakker, Calvin College, Grand Rapids.

De dienstmaagd giet van het geslachte lam
het bloed de schaal uit. Gij legt naast de haard
nieuw hout neer, vrouw, wier schoot mijn stem bewaart.
De spiegel blinkt. Het vlees hangt in de vlam.

Diep in het bos huilt een wolvin die baart,
en mijn stamvader die de deur inkwam
verheft wat hij als welp het nest uitnam
en nu een kind is, blank en onbehaard.

Wij staan één ogenblik, hij, ik, en't wicht
dat aan zijn schouder leunt, naar dit vertrouwd
tafreel te zien: een wit vertrek, vol licht,

vol geur van vlees en pas getimmerd hout,
vol kort geluk, telkens opnieuw gesticht,
een hofstee op een open plek in 't woud.

The maid pours the blood of the slaughtered lamb
out of the bowl. You put by the hearth
new wood, woman, whose womb preserves my voice.
The mirror glitters. The flesh hangs in the flame.

Deep in the forest a she-wolf, giving birth, whines,
and the founder of my race who came in the door
holds up what he took out of its nest as a cub
and which is now a child, fair and hairless.

*my "improvement"
is a goof!*

We stand one moment, he, I, and the babe
leaning against his shoulder, watching
this familiar scene: a white room full of light,

full of the perfume of meat and fresh timber,
full of brief bliss, established again and again,
a homestead in a clearing in the forest.

Thesis: "Ad Infinitum" is a demonstration in artistic form of the

unification and reconciliation of the spiritual and the material, the eternal and the temporal, of the ideal and the real and of the poet's special function in this process.

Definition: of the problems concerning the interpretation and understanding of poems in general and "Ad Infinitum" in particular:

1. Are we given enough information to allow us to interpret the poem satisfactorily; is it, in other words, theoretically possible to understand it, does the poet succeed in communication with the reader, which, when everything is said and done, must be his ultimate goal?
2. Resulting from this basic question is the secondary question: Can the meaning of the symbols be explained or are we left guessing or expected to come to our own individual interpretations?
3. Related to the first two questions: to what extent may we legitimately use exterior sources of information to explain the meaning of the various symbols and the poem as a whole?

Critics generally agree that the poetic and theoretical work of Nijhoff (1894-1953) proves that he struggled all his literary life with two apparently conflicting elements in his literary and probably his psychic personality. Knuvelde's definition of this struggle, as being a conflict between "geest en vlees,"¹ (spirit and body) is so direct and clear that it is widely quoted, although Sotemann's formulation is also very descriptive. Referring to the poet's "oppositions and contradictions" he describes the situation as "The poet's hankering for a transcendental roof over his head, as well as his longing for simplicity and purity."² The conflict has been described in psychological terms as a struggle between a commitment to his mother's piously religious convictions and a sensual love of physical beauty, in philosophical terms as a struggle between a mystical desire for perfection and a longing to be part of this world. Other terms that have been used are: subjectivity versus objectivity, Christopher versus Satyr, heaven versus earth, and many more. For each formulation proofs can be found in numerous poems.

Enhancing, or resulting from, this dualism is Nijhoff's belief that he lived in a junction of time between two fundamentally different periods, economically, technically, philosophically and artistically.³ To describe this situation, the poet used the word "crisis" ("depression" in economic terms in English) and "revolution" and "a time of bankruptcy of ideals." He was convinced that belief, beauty, nature, would never again be able to serve as places of refuge

for introverted individuals. I understand this to mean that he believed that romantic poetry no longer had a place in the modern world. The world is topsy-turvy, he said, the old order will never come back and there will be a new order, a new universe, created not by gods, but by man. A new attitude was required, especially by the poet. He ascribed a prophet-like function to the poet: It is his function, he said, to prepare quarters in the new world for the human soul. A poet must be like John the Baptist, like a monk, like a soldier, with a strong belief in discipline, but certainly also with faith in the future of mankind. From now on poetry should be written not about things eternal, but about things temporal. "We are in this world and also very much of it", would be another possible formulation of his new philosophy.

About halfway through his career, Nijhoff underwent what was called by Knuvelde⁴ a "wending", a turn-about regarding his attitude to the two extremes, the two sides in the battle. Before this moment, punctuated by the publication of a famous essay "De Pen op Papier"⁵, he can be said to have been in favour of the spiritual, averting contact with the world, striving upward in an effort to see God. After this moment he awoke to earthly reality⁶ and decided in future to keep his soul down in his body. This change should not be understood to imply that the battle had been won, or that the decision gave Nijhoff perfect peace of mind. It does mean that he refrained from locking himself up in an ivory tower, and that he began to face the world in a positive manner. What remained unchanged was his desire for warmth, for purity, for beauty, for happiness, for satisfaction in the widest sense of the word. His poems from then on are attempts to catch in words this shaft of sunlight, to discover signs of heaven on earth, to bring together romance and reality, past and present, eternity and mortality, the possible and the impossible.

"Ad Infinitum" is the last but one of the shorter poems in Nieuwe Gedichten (1934) and serves, for a number of reasons, as a good example of the poet's work from his later period. Thematically as well as stylistically it is representative also of the eight sonnets, although its imagery is perhaps more compact than in the case of some of the others. This must be part of the reason why few critics make more than a passing remark about it. Theun de Vries uses the poem to demonstrate a development in the poet's work from passivity to activity because of a prominent masculine presence in the poem⁷; Spillebeen no more than mentions the significance of its title⁸.

In the first stanza there are a number of words that obviously have a symbolic meaning. They are "dienstmaagd" (maid), "geslachte

lam" (slaughtered lamb), "bloed" (blood), "schoot" (womb/lap), "stem" (voice), "spiegel" (mirror), "vlees" (flesh/meat) and "stem" (voice). They are related to the Passion and expiatory death of Christ - the "dienstmaagd" resembling the Virgin Mary, the slaughtered lamb Jesus Christ, the blood and the flesh belonging to the lamb and in the same context the flame representing that which purifies. Two words that are less readily recognizable are "spiegel" and "stem", which do have scriptural overtones nevertheless, in addition to wider and more conventional symbolic meanings. "Stem" appears in Matthew 3: 3 regarding the life of John the Baptist: "For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." It is important to keep in mind this prophetic element of the word "voice" when we come to the final interpretation of the poem. In addition to the biblical symbolic meaning, "voice" is a traditional metaphor for the singer, more specifically the poet. The other word, "spiegel", is also found in the bible and also in a metaphorical context: I Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." The modern version of this text has "a poor reflection" for "glass darkly." The Dutch Bible has, in all versions, "spiegel." There is good reason to believe that the poet meant this image to be involved in the totality of the meaning of the symbolism, and not only, or not at all, because applying scriptural images in this way is common practice in Nijhoff's work.

A second digression from the text, this time to another poem by Nijhoff, promises to contribute to our understanding of the symbolism. In many poems Nijhoff uses mirrors, windows and equivalents of these objects symbolically, but in few as forcefully as in a poem published only a few months before "Ad Infinitum," namely the long epic poem "Heer Halewijn." This poem is based on a medieval ballad and is known in English as the story of Bluebeard, "the brutal king who killed six wives before he was killed himself by the brothers of the seventh,"⁹ or in the Dutch ballad's and Nijhoff's version, by the seventh person herself.

The elements from this poem which are relevant to the interpretation of "Ad Infinitum" are the following: 1. Halewijn and the princess ("het koningskind," the seventh wife-to-be) are irresistibly drawn towards each other because they need each other to become "whole", Halewijn being the embodiment of "voice," i.e. spirit and the princess being the embodiment of nature. He calls himself a spirit, who can only become human if he can possess the body of the princess. This explains his lust for blood. 2. Before leaving to meet her "lover" the princess sands before a mirror and undergoes a kind of metamorphosis. Like St. Sebastian from "Het Veer," she leaves her own

body and her own historical environment, so to speak, and enters into the time and the surrounding of the poet and us, i.e. the 20th century and the Netherlands, recognizable by modern Dutch place names, and other scenes. In all cases it is the mirror which brings about this miraculous change. The mirror always forms the border between two "worlds." Entering through it, like Alice in Lewis Carroll's book, one enters a "Wonderland", a wonderland indeed, because it is this world, our world, that Sebastian and the prince and the yet-to-be-born "voice" from "Ad Infinitum" enter, and there is nothing supernatural about it. The "stem" is the poet, the prophet (perhaps Nijhoff), who experiences entering the wonderland of this earth as a coming home, almost in so many words. 3. A remarkable resemblance between "Heer Halewijn" and our poem is the virgin carrying the voice/ the singing head of Halewijn in her "schoot" (womb/lap) going home, (ful)filled or having fulfilled her heavenly/earthly function: to be the bearer of the "saviour" ("word become flesh") so that we may live in the new world, the new heaven, on earth, the Netherlands for Nijhoff.

In stanza 1 two events were projected: a metamorphosis and a birth. Both occur in stanza 2. By means of a number of signs we become aware that we have "arrived" in another world. In stanza 1 the general atmosphere and the actions were of a religious nature; in stanza 2 exactly the opposite of anything that can be called spiritual is found: in contrast to a virgin ("dienstmaagd") we find a (she-)wolf, traditionally and also according to the scriptures (cf. a wolf in sheep's clothing) the embodiment of evil, of falseness, of savageness. The wolf, far from being virginal, is giving birth to a whelp, whining all the while. But it was also a wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, the cradle of a civilisation. In this poem too, a wolf gives birth to a man, procreated in a way, not by the holy ghost, but by the arch-father of poets, the founder of a race, thus coming home, to earth. Note in this context the determined gesture by the maid in stanza 1: she pours the blood, traditionally containing the "soul", out of the bowl; the end-position of the preposition "uit" reinforcing this action. Notice also the new word she uses. The message is clear: the time of supernatural bliss is past; heaven should now be looked for on earth. The result is depicted in the sestet.

Comparing the title "Ad Infinitum" with the scene in the sestet, is no action of any kind. It contains a stationary scene which lasts only a moment; it is a point in time and a point has, by definition, no dimensions. At the same time, according to the title, it happens continuously, ad infinitum. Thus we have a remarkable juxtaposition of infinity and finitude, and this is, of course, exactly the poet's intention. The scene described, is one we often find in Nijhoff's poetry. As a paradox it is reminiscent of the scene in "Het Veer" in

which Nijhoff uses thirty lines to describe silence! The elements are we seem to be confronted with a peculiar paradox. In the sestet there also stereotyped: the colour white, a light room, both found abundantly in all stages of Nijhoff's work, and always with positive connotations, relate to purity, godliness, new life. One example will suffice, from De Wandelaar (1916): "Het Licht:"

Het licht, God's witte licht, breekt zich in kleuren;
Kleuren zijn daden van het licht dat breekt.

(The light, God's white light, breaks up in colours: Colours are deeds of light breaking up.)

"Geur van vlees" and "pas getimmerd hout" ('perfume of meat/flesh' and 'fresh timber') both have scriptural and non-scriptural, i.e. very "down-to-earth" connotations, thus once more almost literally blending spirit and flesh. The three people in the room, apparently the arch father, the poet that was born into this new life and the kid (probably the maid), present an obviously perfectly happy group and may be a profane variation of the Holy Trinity.

The final image is most successful in suggesting the victory of the momentary, yet perfect happiness, caused by creation of order, over the eternal but amorphous bliss promised by a supernatural state of bliss, of virility over sterility, arrested in a few words - a homestead on a clearing in the forest. Only a great poet could do this. 6

Notes:

1. G. Knuvelde, Nederlandse Letterkunde. Vierde deel, ('s Hertogenbosch: L.C.G. Malmberg, 1961), p.282.
2. A.L. Sotemann, "'Non-spectacular' Modernism: Martinus Nijhoff's Poetry in its European context.' In: Modernism in the Netherlands and Belgium in the First Quarter of the 20th century. Six Essays. (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff), p.107.
3. Martinus Nijhoff, Les maar, er staat niet wat er staat. (Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1974), p.19.
4. Knuvelde, p.284.
5. M. Nijhoff, "De pen op papier", De Gids, Sept. 1926.
6. Knuvelde, p.284.
7. Theun de Vries, Wandelaar in de werkelijkheid. ('s Gravenhage: Uitgeverij BZZTOH, 1980), p.52.
8. W. Spillebeen, De geboorte van het stenen kindje. (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij B. Gottmer, 1977), p.201.
9. Funk and Wagnall's New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language (New York and London, 1951). 8