

NOTES ON NIJHOFF'S WAR POEMS

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I realize that the association of Nijhoff with war is quite unusual. I can even supply the reasons why this combination is an unlikely one, the most important being that Nijhoff is known as a man of peace and harmony rather than as a man of war and conflict. Having said this, I would also claim that ignoring the issue of war, not writing poems about battles and bloodshed, is also making a statement about war. Moreover, Nijhoff did have a few things to say about certain aspects of war, more specifically the Second World War, but always indirectly, in retrospect and reflectively. He did, however, dedicate a handful of poems to the subject of warfare and soldiers as such, both in his early work, more specifically in *De Wandelaar* (The wanderer) (1916) and in his last book *Nieuwe Gedichten* (New poems) (1934). In his so-called "Verspreide Gedichten" (Various poems) he even made the second World War, or rather certain aspects of it, the specific subject of a few poems; but these were only collected posthumously, in his *Verzamelde Gedichten* (Collected poems) (1976) and are therefore not so well-known as those published in collection during his lifetime. In addition to the handful of poems on World War II, he also referred to it, directly or indirectly, in a number of articles in various literary journals. All of this seems to me to be sufficient justification to spend a few pages studying Nijhoff's involvement in matters of war. In so doing, of course, I am further complicating the picture of Nijhoff, which is quite complicated already.

Several critics have recognized the fact that Nijhoff's work, for various reasons, is more difficult to classify than that of most other poets. It is not surprising therefore, that the modern poetry critic Sötemann, in an article on Nijhoff's place in European literature,¹ was able to make a list of close to twenty names of literary schools and movements with which Nijhoff's work, or certain important aspects of it, have been associated. To mention only a few: the critic Binnendijk and the poet Marsman and several others used the term 'Classical' with reference to Nijhoff; Greshoff and Vestdijk called him romantic; De Vries, Hoornik, and Debrot pointed out the realism in Nijhoff's work; and some other terms used by well-known critics are baroque, impressionist, existentialist, magic realist, and cubist. In addition, Christian readers and critics are proud to point out numerous rhymed versions of psalms produced by

Nijhoff, as well as his fairly well-known plays based on the gospels, collected under the title *Het Heilige Hout* (The Holy Wood) (1950). And indeed, Nijhoff did discuss religion, and more specifically the Christian belief as opposed to, for instance, socialism, in some articles.²

I realize that several of the terms I have mentioned to identify Nijhoff's work, while not mutually exclusive, are somewhat contradictory and do not do much to promote better understanding of Nijhoff's work. To add the term "martial" to the list might make things worse. This is certainly not my intention and I must make it very clear that the words "war" and "soldiers", etc. figure only very indirectly in Nijhoff's work. Being a natural symbolist, so to speak, Nijhoff uses these concepts the same way he uses most other concepts, objects, persons, occasions and historical events, namely as symbols or representations of something bigger, more profound than the things themselves. It is for this reason that Nijhoff is generally recognized as one of the most important Dutch symbolist poets of the twentieth century. How his interest in soldiers and war relates to his poetic activities, then, is the main object of my presentation.

Nijhoff's interest in symbolism is demonstrated in the first place by his publication of a number of articles on the topic and further by his expressed admiration for the best-known French symbolists of the end of the 19th century.³ Some influence of or at least similarity with them, Verlaine in particular, seems quite obvious, especially in the poet's earlier work. As he developed, however, he appears to have moved away from the traditional style and symbols generally used by the more prominent French symbolists and to have developed a greater affinity with T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, about whom he also wrote articles.⁴ Increased realism also became one of the more distinct features of the poems of the second half of his career. This means, in effect, that traditional symbolistic images like the sun, the moon, castles and towers, the sky, the night, gardens, trees and flowers were replaced by modern, realistic and in most cases typically Dutch symbols like dunes and dykes and lighthouses, boats and ferries, kitchen utensils, and cars and bicycles - all well-known, typically Nijhoffian symbols which, together with the style that went with the modern symbols, caused critics to call

Nijhoff the first modern poet in The Netherlands. This does not necessarily imply, however, that Nijhoff's basic beliefs had changed equally dramatically; it did mean that elevated concepts such as heaven, god and similar religious terms had become more concrete and earthly as well. At heart he remained the idealist he had always been, and also the symbolist he had always been, seeking universal truths through material things, just as he always had; he merely used different symbols to express his ideas about them. It is also in this light that we must read and interpret Nijhoff's war poems and his references to soldiers, who are, with children, well-known Nijhoff symbols.

Before dealing specifically with those poems, I believe it would be useful first to have a look at one or two articles Nijhoff wrote and which both contain explicit references to the Second World War. There is in the first place an article with the title "Vragen en antwoorden I, N.a.v. Roland Holst: 'Onderweg' en A. Viruly: 'Verrassende ontmoetingen'." (Questions and answers I. With reference to A. Roland Holst: 'On the way' and A. Viruly: 'Surprising encounters') (*De Gids* II-1941).⁵ It is clear from the date that it was written at the beginning of the war, which was in The Netherlands the time of wailing sirens, of German soldiers marching down the streets of Dutch cities, of darkened windows, of food shortages and hatred between Dutch and Germans and between Dutch and Dutch. Nijhoff talked about these matters with great knowledge based on much personal experience, but behind them he always saw other things, profound universal principles. As in the case of the symbols mentioned above, he sees principles where other people only see objects.

Nijhoff describes how he got stuck in Amsterdam after attending a meeting there, and how he then met an ex-fellow-soldier named Ter Booghe. He relates that they were unable to catch the train to Utrecht because its departure had been delayed as a result of yet another siren going off. Their wanderings in Amsterdam from one bar to another became, in Nijhoff's mind, wanderings through life. The Leidse Plein was a grey, endless plain; crossing it was to him like wandering across The Old World Sea along whose edges Ulysses and his comrades had wandered, or like Dublin in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Although he declares that he does not possess the talent of either Homer or Joyce, he succeeds nevertheless in showing very effectively the resemblance between the experiences of Homer's and Joyce's heroes and his own: one of the bars they visited was called the Kalupso, another one the Cyclops, where a darkened door closed behind them and they went down to a basement where barbaric music was playing; and there were also Circe

and the Phaeakians. All of this they visited on their journey around the Leidse Plein. The symbolic significance of these places is, of course, not hard to identify.

As they were discussing the war and their personal and mutual experiences relating to it, Ter Booghe taught Nijhoff that war is not a catastrophe like an earthquake or a flood; war is always the product of human activity. War is, like so many other human inventions, the visible and very tragic, but apparently unavoidable, expression of the conflict between mind and machine, a conflict which the soul is bound to lose but which never ends. This is typically Nijhoff's way of lifting everyday human activities, but also great dramatic ones, to a mythical or spiritual level.

The soul, he says, is trapped by the flesh, but poetry, for example the poetry of Roland Holst, releases the mind from its bonds and helps the poet, and consequently the reader, to reach a higher level of realization. Prose, according to Nijhoff's explanation, cannot do that unless, like Tolstoy's *War and peace*, it comes to certain conclusions concerning human existence. Good prose, like poetry, leads the reader to understand man's mortality but also, paradoxically, his immortality, of which, as part of creation, he is also the bearer and exponent.

"One may think of war in terms of a catastrophe," Ter Booghe explains, "but not in the sense most people think of it." In order to explain what he means by this, Ter Booghe refers to the Dutch author Viruly, who was not only a poet but also a pilot for KLM. He loved his work because, among other things, it made him believe in the possibility of man indeed being the master of creation, subjecting the world and living in perfect harmony with his surroundings. Soon, Viruly dreamed, man would be able to call his own country his motherland and the whole world his fatherland, all part of one united whole with all its elements relating to each other the way they were intended to.

These beautiful dreams were shattered one bright morning in May 1940. The aircraft which man had hoped would help him find happiness, brought chaos and destruction. That is what war meant to Nijhoff: a conflict between body and mind, between reality and dream, which are, however, not necessarily direct opposites. His message was always: don't give up your dream, your ideals, continue to believe in the dominance of eternal spiritual values over transient material ones. One may probably safely assume that Nijhoff is putting certain words in Ter Booghe's mouth or else adjusting them to suit his purpose.

In August 1945 Nijhoff wrote an article in which the same philosophy is expressed in comparable metaphors. The title of the article is *Nieuwe Aardsheid. Verhouding*

tussen de huidige mens en zijn wereld. (New Earthiness. The relationship between modern man and his world).⁶ The title goes a long way to explain Nijhoff's philosophy in a nutshell. Both "nieuwe" and "aardsheid" are keywords in Nijhoff's later works, even those before the Second World War and thus before this article; the War did nothing to change his views in this regard. It was now over, millions of people had died, but we are all part of the earth we live on and we cannot reject it even if we want to, because this would make us traitors to ourselves.

In this article, published in *Vrij Nederland*, Nijhoff confesses (he actually used the word "bekent") that he was a so-called "zuiveraar." To make this confession was quite an effort on his part. At the same time, he argues, it was his duty to accept this task. Although he was well aware of the words "Judge not, that you be not judged" and "Whosoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone," he believed that he had no choice but to do what he was asked to do. The war had been a total war, inhuman acts had been committed and these acts had to be avenged, because they had been perpetrated by criminals on innocent people. And also man's honor was at stake. There would be no peace until the criminals had been brought to justice and had paid for their crimes against humanity. This also is part of life. The enemy had not come to us, Nijhoff states, in an honest or honorable uniform: he had treacherously pretended to be our friend, our protector, our fellow countryman. We, the Dutch, had harbored him before he stabbed us in the back. We knew him now and it would be a crime if we did not pursue him to the very corners of his hiding place. And here, another typical Nijhovan statement: we had to prosecute him to the depth of our own weak heart, our heart which is always inclined to forgive and to forget. Nijhoff felt that he was acting on behalf of thousands of his countrymen and in the name of justice if he exercised the power granted to him. We should have the courage of our convictions, he says, and be honest but strict judges and sentence to death those who deserved death for their crimes against humanity, against creation. One death sentence might save the lives of thousands in the future. This sounds like "summa iniuria", Nijhoff says, but it is in fact "summu ius."

Our world may be in ruins, but that is no reason to betray it. The post-war world is no more and no less than an image of our own mortality, like the Parthenon in Athens, or the Forum in Rome, but these very structures are also proof that we live on the edge of eternity, if not quite in it. Gone is the beauty of the earth, like a body that used to beguile our senses and is now decayed. But the world should be seen as being primarily spiritual,

and it demands no other love than clean chaste spiritual love. Before (the war) we were both poets and lovers, now we must only be poets and take care of the values that will guarantee the continuation of the world.

At this point Nijhoff is reminded of a poem by Bertus Aafjes, *Voetreis naar Rome* (Journey to Rome on foot), and especially the part dedicated to the destruction of the temple of the goddess Vesta in the forum in Rome. Nijhoff then quotes the lines which, in his opinion, describe exactly the relationship of modern man, that is post-war man, to the world, beginning with Aafjes' description of the destruction of the temple after it had been desecrated:

Aanschouw het beeld uwer vergankelijkheid:

Zuilen, neerliggend als gevelde eiken

Of zinloos stijgende boven het puin,

Waaraan de kleine kapitelen prijken

Als een gesnoeide bladerloze kruin...⁷

The second quotation describes the resurrection of the Vestal virgins who ask the poet what he is looking for in the ruins. The poet, like Nijhoff in his function of "zuiveraar" after the war, has no option but to give account of himself; he answers through his Muse:

...Ik zoek als gij, godd'lijke priesteressen,

Een kuisheid die van deze aarde is,

Hartstochtelijk als de vlam der cypressen

En zuiver als het water en de lis.

Ik zoek voorbij de purperen alkoven

De oude Eros, goddelijk en rein:

Ik wil zo diep in het lichaam geloven

Tot waar zijn dromen ongeschonden zijn...

Ik wil geen schaduw van de hemel dulden

Over de bodem van mijn aards bestaan

Noch dat de lasten van mijn aardse schulden

Als dode manen aan de hemel staan.

Als ik geen god ben, ben ik een der goden,

In een rijk onder eigen vrij beheer,

En als ik eenmaal rust onder zijn zoden,

Keer ik in rozen en liederen weer...⁸

The Vestal virgins question the optimism of the poet: will man indeed be able to rise and purify himself? Will he indeed be resurrected? Will he be faithful beyond death? The poet believes it:

...Maar ik: Serenissima, nieuwe tijden -

Gulden eeuwen van aardsheid - breken aan;

Wij vergaan in de smeltkroes van het lijden
Langzaam tot het goud van een nieuw bestaan.

These beautiful lines effectively express what Nijhoff himself thought of life on earth and the function and role of poetry in general, and also how war should be regarded. He seems to have recognized himself and what he has to say in Aafjes' work, which undoubtedly helped him to formulate his message.

Nijhoff's war poems reflected the development in his poetry in general and, in turn, his ever maturing and expanding view of life. In *De Wandelaar* (1916) he appears to be completely obsessed by the hopelessness of his efforts to escape the world of which he cannot be a part, and by the vanity of his attempts to rise above it. This feeling was to continue for more than a decade: almost every poem in his first book seems to be an expression of passiveness, of inactivity, and an expression also of his inability to break out of the vicious circle of escape from and return to reality.

The only poem in *De Wandelaar* that is in any way related to war is "Zingende Soldaten" (Singing soldiers). In this poem Nijhoff seems to identify himself with the soldiers who suffer physical pain, who, quite literally, cannot bear the hardness of the world, and who are, moreover, also spiritually lonely and god-forsaken:

De keien zijn zo puntig op de straten:
Blonde soldaten, doen je voeten pijn,
Smoor je verdriet met een naïef refrein:
"Marie, Marie, ik moet je gaan verlaten."
Wij zien vooruit naar 't verre doel der torens
En lopen met z'n vieren naast elkaar.
Melancholie, uw vondsten zijn bizar:
"De duivel heeft twee hoeven en twee horens."
Waar is de tamboer, waar is de muziek?
God heeft ons op de weg alleen gelaten,
Ons lijf gaat breken en ons hart is ziek -
Zingt van een ring en van liefde en van smart,
Zingt van verachting voor een paar granaten!
Een goed soldaat heeft een groot kinderhart.¹⁰

Not even the future in the form of a distant goal can inspire the soldiers. This view of the life of a soldier very effectively reflects the mood of all Nijhoff's earlier work. Victory is not even mentioned as a possibility: a few grenades will probably be the end for the soldiers. Nijhoff seems to be obsessed by a feeling of the absurd and to have adopted what would later be called an existentialist philosophy. In this conviction Nijhoff is,

of course, a product of his age.

Yet Nijhoff never succumbed to the lure of negativism, a quality very different from despair, and kept working to try to pull himself out of the morass of passivity. To what extent his Christian upbringing helped him overcome this destructive, passive attitude is hard to say and in fact is of little consequence to the poetic quality of his work.

Already in *Vormen*, his second book of poems, published in 1924, there seem to be signs of a more positive outlook; at least the two poems in it that have to do with certain aspects of war, seem to witness this. The poems concerned are "Soldatenkerstmis" (A soldiers' Christmas) and "De soldaat die Jezus kruisigde" (The soldier who crucified Jesus). Gone are the signs of escape from and rejection of reality. *Vormen* was published in 1924, around the time when Nijhoff was in the process of consciously undergoing a complete change in his ideas about the meaning of life. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in the content and style of his poetry and has been the subject of numerous discussions of Nijhoff's work. It is also noteworthy, I think, that in both poems Christianity, indeed Christ himself, is the subject of the poem on the anecdotal level, although in a more or less legendary form.

Thus one can say with reference to *Vormen* that there is on the one hand the persistent desire for something more than worldly values, the desire, as he put it, "to see God", and on the other hand the growing belief that these values are not completely out of his reach. After all, in "Soldatenkerstmis" the Christ child is right in the tent with the soldiers and touches them, and they in their turn are moved by the innocence and beauty of the child. In other words, there appears to be a good deal of mutual understanding and appreciation.

In "De soldaat die Jezus kruisigde", the poet, as a poet, identifies himself with the soldier who crucified Christ, thus making himself personally responsible for His death. He is punished for this by having to write about Him all the time, which seems indeed to be the case with Nijhoff himself: the number of times he quotes from the Bible or directly and indirectly refers to it, are to a large extent responsible for the image many readers have of Nijhoff. This poem also shows that the distance that previously existed between himself and God, and which is described in poem after poem in his earlier work, has completely disappeared, although a basic sense of hostility is still quite apparent. On the basis of Nijhoff's continuous awareness of and desire for spiritual satisfaction, I must strongly disagree with De Vries¹¹ and Spillebeen,¹² who both seem to regard Nijhoff as a failed Marxist. They both seem to argue in

their extensive writings on Nijhoff that if he had only lived long enough, Nijhoff would have "seen the light," as they did. Never have critics been more wrong, I believe.

The contemporary poet, compatriot and fellow romantic Roland Holst held a different view of Nijhoff's *Vormen*, which goes to show how difficult, if not impossible, it is to read and interpret poetry without a great deal of subjectivity. Roland Holst divides all poets into two main categories: major and minor. A major poet is one who desires something outside or above this world. This desire inspires his life and work and generally makes his life bearable. It is indeed clear from Holst's own poetry that his belief in the existence of kindred spirits, somewhere beyond the horizon, lay at the heart of all the ideas expressed in his poems. The "I" in virtually all of Holst's poems has put this world behind him and longs for the day when he will be joined with his fellow spirits in Elysium, the "beautiful isle of somewhere." A minor poet, according to Holst, constantly looks for happiness in this world. He is not driven by a supernatural desire, his struggle is a struggle against his own powerlessness. His desire is for natural beautiful things that give him satisfaction. He may possess a potential desire for higher values, but this desire stands in the way of happiness rather than inspiring him as is the case with major poets. That is the reason why Holst, in his own words, "kept walking, walking along the beach," his eyes fixed on some illusory or illusive land where eternal peace reigns.

In his one and only war poem in *Nieuwe Gedichten*, "De soldaat en de zee" (The soldier and the sea), Nijhoff most likely had Roland Holst in mind, identifying himself with one soldier and Roland Holst with another. First he describes the type of soldier who, like Holst himself, walked along the beach, waiting for voices from the gods to talk to him. Then he says that he himself had once been like that soldier. He had also walked along the beach, but looking out to the horizon, his eyes had met nothing but nothing:

En heengegaan zoals hij,
heb ik een stem horen spreken
die wind en brandend getij
verstaan doen en onderbreken.
Terwijl een krans van bleek schuim
zich bevend legde om mijn voeten,
terwijl mijn blik in het ruim
niets dan het niets ontmoette.

The soldier, obviously representing Nijhoff, eventually awakes from his romantic dream; he

ontwaakt... als kind der aarde,
[en] erkent als zijn kostbaarst goed
de taal die een moeder bewaarde,
en schrijft, nu de hand schrijven gaat,
datgene wat men moet schrijven
voor broeders als de soldaat
die men in het glas zag drijven
en die nu nog in een wolk
zingend langs zee gaan, maar later
zien dat het strijdende volk
een schoner zee is dan water.¹⁴

It is quite clear that it is at this point that Holst's and Nijhoff's roads separate completely. Nijhoff did not, in contrast to Holst whom he greatly admired, find it necessary to give up this world, and he did not want to. It is in fact precisely his unwillingness and his probable inability to do so which caused the frustration expressed in his earlier poems: on the one hand he believed that he had to renounce the world, but on the other he didn't really wish to.

From this moment on, for Nijhoff happiness was finding satisfaction in just those things that, probably under the influence of his predecessors Verwey and Van Eyck and later Roland Holst, he had rejected, believing that in order to "see God" one had to look up to the sky. Now he turned his eyes down, his back to the sea, his face to the land. It is then that the scales seemed to fall from his eyes and that he saw what he had always looked for in the wrong place. This unsuccessful search is described in poem after poem. It is important to note that Nijhoff did not choose between two sides or opposites; his discovery that the manifestations of God's love are to be found on the earth did not imply that he had to reject God. On the contrary, it led him to accept both God and the world. Indeed he seems to say that accepting God *implies* accepting the world. To Nijhoff it also seems to imply patriotism and loyalty to all the values that are associated with one's past, also with one's mother tongue, with history in general and the history of one's own country in particular. And therefore even with war.

Among his *Verspreide Gedichten* (Various poems) there are three poems specifically about the Second World War. They are "Bij het graf van de Nederlandse onbekende soldaat gevallen in de meidagen 1940" (At the grave of the Dutch Unknown Soldier killed in May 1940), written in 1942; "Wij zijn vrij" (We are free), written just after the war, and finally "Tot de gevallen" (To the fallen). These words may seem archaic and the

ideas expressed in them quite old-fashioned, since we now live in a time when we don't wave national flags and seldom sing the national anthem, when any show of nationalism or patriotism is generally frowned upon.

What I find especially notable about these poems is that, although they can hardly be called symbolical in any sense, they reflect the same spirit that characterize poems written long before the war, for example such well-known poems as "Awater," written in 1934 and "Het Uur U," from 1937, two poems in which symbolism abounds. In both groups of poems, faith and belief in a better future are expressed, however dark and chaotic the present world may appear. They are, for this reason, light-years removed from the defeatist attitude of *De wandelaar*. Nijhoff appears to believe that however dark and chaotic the world sometimes may appear, it is part of man's mental and physical make-up, always to rise out of the ashes and forever start building a new and better world. That is why he could say, or sing in: "Tot de gevallen:"

Gij doden, die de dag niet meer beleeft
 voor ons door uw heldhaftig bloed gekocht,
 gij die verbitterd in 't verborgen vocht
 en in een kamp of in een kerker bleeft,
 o laat het woord, dat uw laatste ademtocht,
 ontstijgend met uw ziel, gestameld heeft,
 weer horen, opdat g'ons een teken geeft
 dat zelfs de dood het niet heeft overmocht.
 Ziet, 't vlagdoek dat uw baar niet heeft gedekt
 ontplooit zich boven ons, en 't volkslied dat
 u bleef onthouden zet zijn klanken in...
 En wij verstaan, in de onze opgewekt,
 uw stem in 't feestgedruis van veld en stad:
 "Leev' Nederland! Leve de Koningin!"¹⁵

In these poems religion and patriotism, in others love in many different forms, are all elements of that fundamental conviction that these are my people, this is my land; and nobody can take it away from me, for even in death I am part of it and it is part of me.

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¹"Non-spectacular 'Modernism: Martinus Nijhoff's Poetry in its European Context." In: *Nijhoff, Van Ostaijen, 'De Stijl'. Modernisms in The Netherlands and Belgium in the First Quarter of the 20th Century. Six Essays.* Edited by F. Bulhof. The Hague, 1976.

²Nijhoff, M. *Verzameld Werk I en II. Kritisch, verhalend en nagelaten proza.* The Hague, 1976.

³*Ibid.* p. 537.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 1043.

⁵*Ibid.* p. 916.

⁶*Ibid.* p. 969.

⁷Observe the symbol of your instability:
 Columns, flattened like felled oaks
 Or inanely rising above the debris,
 Upon which little capitals flaunt
 Like pruned, leafless crowns...

⁸I am looking, like you, godly priestesses.
 For a chasteness which is of this earth,
 Passionate like the flame of the cypress
 And pure like water and the iris.
 I search past purple alcoves
 For the old Eros, godly and pure:
 I want to believe in this body.
 To where its dreams are unscathed...
 I shall tolerate no shadow of heaven
 Across the surface of my life on earth
 Nor that the burden of my earthly debts
 Hang like dead moons in the sky.
 If I am not God, I am at least one of them,
 In an empire in which I am in control
 And once I rest under its sods,
 I will return to it in roses and beautiful songs...

⁹But as for me: Serenissima, new times -
 Golden ages of earthliness - have come;
 We are transformed in the melting pot of distress
 Gradually to the gold of a new life.

¹⁰The stones in the street are so sharp:
Blond soldiers, if your feet ache,
Drown your sorrows in a naive refrain:
"Mary, dear Mary, I'm going to leave you now."

We look ahead at the distant goals, the towers,
And the four of us are walking abreast.
Melancholy, your inventions are sometimes bizarre:
"The devil has two feet and two horns."

Where are the drums, where the music?
God left us to ourselves on the road,
Our bodies are cracking up and our hearts are sick.

Just sing of a ring and of love and of grief,
Just sing of contempt of a few grenades!
A good soldier has the heart of a child.

¹¹Vries, T. de. *Martinus Nijhoff. Wandelaar in de werkelijkheid*. The Hague, 1946. Uitgave BZZTôH. Amsterdam, 1980.

¹²Spillebeen, W. *De geboorte van het Stenen Kind je. Thematische analyse van het scheppend werk van Martinus Nijhoff*. Nijmegen, 1977.

¹³I also left, like him,
I also heard a voice that spoke to me
Audible and inaudible at times
Because of wind and breaking waves.

While a wreath of pale foam
Wrapped itself around my feet
While I stared into space
And my eyes met nothing but space.

¹⁴Awakes... as a child of this earth,
[and] discovers for its most precious possession
The language you learned at your mother's knee.

And once you begin to write,
You write what you have to write
For brothers like the said soldier
Whom you saw float in the window

And who, at this time, are in a cloud
Singing, walking along the beach
But later will discover that struggling people
Are more beautiful than the sea.

¹⁵You dead ones, who did not live to see the day
Which you bought with your precious blood,
You, who bitterly struggled, unseen by others,
Or spent your days in a camp or a prison,
O, let the word that escaped with your last breath,
Rising with your souls,
Speak once again and give us a sign
That not even death could conquer you.

Observe how the banner that did not cover you
Unfolds above our heads, and the anthem
Which you remembered can already be heard...
"Long live The Netherlands! Long live our dearest Queen!"