

³Translation by H. Ruger and D. Howard in *Under Dutch Skies*, Windsor, Ontario: Netherlandic Press, 1981, p. 13.

⁴Translation of *Al die mooie beloften*, from *The Prospect and the River*.

⁵"Gedichten maken is woorden vinden, woorden die onder woorden brengen, misschien is dichten woorden vinden voor wat er niet was, voordat die woorden er waren."

From: "Over het maken van een gedicht" in *Al die mooie beloften* by Rutger Kopland, Amsterdam: G. A. van Oorschot, 1978, p. 37.

Simon Vestdijk. *The garden where the brass band played*. (Originally published in Dutch as *De koperen tuin*.) Translated by A. Brotherton. Leyden: Sythoff/London: Heinemann. 1965. 312 p.

William Rueter
University of Toronto Press

Simon Vestdijk occupies a unique place in twentieth-century Dutch literature as the prolific and versatile author of stories, essays, novels, and poems. Born in Harlingen in 1898, he began his career by studying medicine, but from 1932 he was seriously and deeply involved in all aspects of literature, including criticism, historical novels, an opera libretto, and reviews, with an acute interest in the widest variety of subjects. The essayist Menno ter Braak understandably described Vestdijk as "The Devil's magician", and A. Roland Holst referred to Vestdijk as the man "who writes faster than God can read."

Vestdijk is known for the objective, intellectual style he uses in his almost fifty novels — whether autobiographical, partially autobiographical, or historical — and for his search for the mystery within the most commonplace characters. *The garden where the brass band played* is a case in point. Published in 1950, it is a moving account of the emotional development of a lonely young man early in this century.

The younger son in a bourgeois household in a small provincial Dutch town, Nol sees life from a distance. He is always in conflict with his superficial older brother Chris and there is a long-term bond of hatred between them. But Nol knows his own character as well as that of his contemporaries:

[Chris] was determined to be taken notice of, and in his constant fever of excitement it was difficult for him to distinguish between reality and fantasy. I was both

more of a dreamer and more of a realist than he was. If I lied I knew I was lying, while Chris's whole existence was one big lie, a fiction of his own making, which the world around him gave a certain measure of approval to... He knew everything about everything. He told everyone what he heard or made up, he would forget it almost at once, and then avoid the boys who remembered what he had told them.

In Nol's eyes, poor Chris "reached his highest peak of intelligence" at age ten and then declined into predictable mediocrity.

Throughout the book Vestdijk captures superbly the mood and atmosphere of the period in a few brief, carefully chosen phrases. The key scene of the novel occurs after the family's return from their annual summer holiday, "after one of those weeks of imprisonment in the open air." Nol's mother takes him to a public garden where he is fascinated by Cuperus, the conductor of the park's brass band. In hearing Cuperus conduct a Sousa march he discovers the overwhelming power of music. Impulsively, he dances with a tall, pale, girl four years his senior — Trix, Cuperus's daughter — with whom he unwittingly falls in love.

Cuperus comes to Nol's house to give him piano lessons. His reputation as a drunkard has preceded him, and after a time he inadvertently disgraces himself with the family's maid and stops teaching Nol. Nol's hero-worship of the brilliant, erratic Cuperus continues despite Cuperus' loss of pupils and the town's growing disapproval of him. A chance meeting encourages Nol to collect money from his friends to help the grateful Cuperus. Lessons are resumed. Nol comes completely under the spell of his teacher.

Music plays a major role throughout the book. It becomes Nol's obsession, as well as the author's. In the main section of the book (almost an intermezzo) Vellinga, the editor of the local newspaper, founds an Opera Society and Cuperus is engaged to conduct a mostly amateur performance of *Carmen*. There are wonderful evocative descriptions of Cuperus' gradual discovery of the depth of Bizet's music as he tries out passages at the piano:

...here it is, from the ninth bar...just listen to this, it's pure Wagner... marvelous! But not at the end, still, that's damned good, too, that E flat-A flat-F chord That's *Tristan*, that's *Parsifal* or whatever you like, but Bizet never heard or read a note of either of them. He might have heard bits of *Lohengrin* and he would have heard *Tannhauser*, that's certain...clever, damned clever.

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