

Cees Nootboom as an international writer

In his article 'Taal en cultuur in *Allerzielen* van Cees Nootboom' (2003) Noble discusses the occurring difficulties in translating novels. According to Noble, the desire to transfer certain effects from the original version to the translated one can change a text to a very large extent. If this is true, is it even possible to say Cees Nootboom is an international writer? Could it be his novels become internationally colored by the agency of the narrators? Perhaps it is a bit too easy to claim this, because other Dutch writers are being translated as well of course. However, their international success is not to be compared with Nootboom's; he is the most translated Dutch writer by far. So the question is, why is Cees Nootboom internationally more successful than others? What makes him more of an international writer than, for instance, Harry Mulisch? Perhaps his writing appeals more to an international audience, or is it just a broader audience? It is hard to give an univocal answer to these questions. Therefore, this essay's aim is solely to reflect on some thoughts concerning Cees Nootboom's success as an international writer.

Perhaps, Nootboom's international success has something to do with his use of themes. Not only does the storytelling in his novels often take place in foreign countries (e.g. *Berlijnse notities*, *De omweg naar Santiago*, *Het volgende verhaal*), but his works also contain exotic elements. Of course other Dutch writers use international themes in their novels as well. However, the majority of these writers do not have the same worldly experience as Nootboom. Mulisch for instance, did not seem to feel the need to travel around the world and become a world citizen like Nootboom. Consequently, Mulisch's novels mostly contain 'closer to home' themes, and are therefore for Dutch readers easier to identify with.

Nootboom's biography definitely confirms his worldly experience. At the age of twenty, Nootboom hitchhiked all through Europe. In 1957 he sailed to Suriname to ask Frances Diana Lichtevelde's father for her hand and married her in New York (Van Belle, 1997). From 1956 he worked as a journalist for *Het Parool*, writing about foreign affairs (Van Belle, 1997). From 1957 until 1960 Nootboom wrote travel stories for Dutch magazine

Elsevier. Later on, he became travel editor for *Avenue* (Van Belle, 1997). He lived in Berkeley (VS) for a year and after that moved to Berlin, where he wrote some intriguing reports on the fall of the Berlin Wall. He also spent some time living in Australia. One of his favorite whereabouts is Menorca, which he often refers to as 'his second home' (www.ceesnooteboom.com). Regarding all the recurring elements from his travels in his works, I find it very plausible Nootboom's international style for the greater part comes from his travel experiences.

Another aspect that might have helped Nootboom in becoming the international writer he is today, is his experience in translating novels. In 1969 he translated Guillen, in 1970 Vallejo, in 1976 Guillevic, in 1989 Neruda and in 1992 Enzensberger. To my mind this must have been enough study material for him to develop an international writing style. By studying the original international works he was about to translate, he came across several international writing styles and was probably influenced by it when he started writing his own international novels. Translating the texts into Dutch must also have helped him a great deal in gaining international writing skills. According to Noble (2003) it is quite a struggle to maintain certain international concepts and styles while translating to another language. The result in Nootboom's case was a novel in Dutch with an international taste to it. I find it therefore not hard to imagine that due to his experiences in translation, he became acquainted with the international style of writing and made it his own. Nootboom himself stated: 'De overdreven lyriek moest uit mijn werk. Voor schrijven is een zekere connaissance du monde nodig. Daarom ben ik gaan reizen' (www.ceesnooteboom.com).

Most people would say *Het volgende verhaal* (1991) was his international breakthrough. Taking a closer look at the literary prizes Nootboom has received, this could definitely be the case: the first awarded international literary prizes date from around that time and keep on coming after 1991. The literary prizes he received from Germany and Austria for instance, date from 1991 until 2008. In 1993 Nootboom was awarded with the Aristeionprijs. In 1994 he won the Premio Grinzano Cavour in Italy and received two awards from Spain in 2000 and 2008. Note that Nootboom did not receive any international literary prizes before 1991. From within Europe that is, because the United States already acknowledged his talent in 1982. Despite of 'early bird' United States, all

of the awardings date from 1991 until 2008 . This implies before 1991, Nootboom was not yet discovered by foreign countries.

If Nootboom had been publishing for thirty years, why did he only just receive international recognition in the nineties? A coincidence? Perhaps not. You could argue Nootboom's writing did not yet appeal to foreign readers, because even though his works contained international themes, they were not yet written in an international style. As I see it, Cees Nootboom did not only need his travel experiences to become an international writer, but also needed the international stylistic devices which he acquired by translating international works. However, Hugo Brems made a remarkable observation on the matter. In *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen* (2006, p402) he points out Nootboom made his comeback in the eighties as a novel writer: 'Na een onderbreking van bijna twintig jaar, waarin hij zich had ontwikkeld tot een belangrijk schrijver van reisverhalen, publiceerde Nootboom in het begin van de jaren tachtig kort na elkaar drie romans: *Rituelen* (1980), *Een lied van schijn en wezen* (1981) en *In Nederland* (1981).' This supports my theory that Nootboom, in his twenty years of travel story writing, gained the international writing skills needed to produce big hits such as *Rituelen* and *Het volgende verhaal*.

As pointed out earlier, Nootboom's website claims *Het volgende verhaal* meant his international break-through in 1991, whereas Brems (2006, p402) starts counting at 1982 with *Rituelen*: 'De bekroning van *Rituelen* in 1982 met de internationale Pegasusprijs van de Mobil Oil Company, met de daaraan verbonden vertalingen, betekende meteen Nootbooms internationale doorbraak.' This discrepancy raises the question: what does 'international' in this case really entail? This is a hard question to answer. Even Oxford Dictionary and Encyclopedia Britannica fail to give an unambiguous answer. All and all it has something to do with nations: 'existing, occurring, or carried out on between nations' or 'agreed on by all or many nations' or 'used by people of many nations'. 'Inter' mostly refers to 'between'. So logically, 'international' must have something to do with a sort of transfer between nations. The next question is, in this context, do we mean to refer to European literature or to global literature? In order not to complicate things I will mainly focus on Nootboom as a European writer. After all, Nootboom is generally regarded a prominent European writer, because of his social and political engagement in European matters. In newspapers, magazines and lectures,

he philosophises about European history and future (www.ceesnooteboom.com). Brems (2006, p297) also portrays him as an international figure, stating Nooteboom's works practically always contains indignation over abuses abroad. To me it is obvious Cees Nooteboom is a worldly-wise figure, who engages in all kinds of international matters, instead of only concerning himself about the national ones. By travelling around, living in several places at once, worrying about international affairs, writing in an international fashion, he has untied himself from every border and proven himself to be an inhabitant of Europe, and perhaps the world. As Van Belle (1997, p3) puts it: 'Als hij ergens bij wil horen, is dat bij de westerse cultuur in haar geheel.'

My own experience with living abroad is that I have taken on a new perspective on culture. Until I came to study at UCL, I thought Dutch and British culture did not differ that much. It was only when I came to London, I became more aware of English culture, and therefore of the differences between the Dutch and the British. By getting in touch with different views, morals and values from other cultures, you come to realise there are more ways than one to think about and deal with matters. Maybe even better ones. In fact, it makes you think twice about the things you took for granted before. If you participate in a different culture you attempt to make it your own, by taking on its customs and ideas. This way, one's view on the world becomes much richer. According to Blumer's symbolic interactionism (Shadid, 2007) someone's culture is constantly being reproduced. This means, when in contact with new cultures, you add certain qualities from these cultures to your own. Under the influence of the other cultures, your view on the world thus evolves more and more into an international one. To me, it seems Cees Nooteboom experienced just that. Van Belle bears out my argument (1997, p9): 'Uiteindelijk kan ook het reizen zelf gezien worden als een voortdurende zoektocht naar geschiedenis, cultuur, naar de smalle en voortdurend verschuivende grens tussen het eigene en het andere.' On the same page Van Belle also states that in his works, balancing on the edge between the inside and outside, insight and oversight is an important theme: 'Zo kleurt de ziel / de ogen bij naar nieuwe beelden'. This is exactly how I would explain getting in touch with new cultures. New images gained from others change your perception of the world and therefore your soul. Wherever you might travel, you will never return the same person. Oberg (1960, in Shadid, 2007) confirms my view: he claims adapting to a new culture might be followed by enculturation: adopted norms, values and habits become part of one's original culture. Thus, new

cultures can become part of your own culture, consequently becoming part of who you are. No doubt Nootboom, with at least three different places of residence and lots of travel experience, 'enculturated' into a member of 'European culture' and therefore created the opportunity to become an international writer. In my mind because Nootboom is a 'jack-of-all-cultures', he appeals to a broader (international) audience. This enables most of the readers to identify with his works, regardless of their culture. In my opinion, that is the most important feature of an international writer: using your writing skills to bridge between nations.

Van Belle (1997, p20) describes Nootboom's intercultural attitude as follows: 'Hij kan behoorlijk opgewonden raken over sociale wantoestanden of politieke corruptie, maar laat zich nooit verleiden tot een vals begrip voor de vreemdelingen die hij onderweg ontmoet'. This shows Nootboom's open-minded attitude towards other cultures, enabling him to adopt whatever he needs to become an international writer. 'Als geen ander is hij zich bewust van het feit dat ieders blik eindig is en wordt bepaald door de omstandigheden. Getuige hiervan het eerste motto van *Rituelen*, waarin gesteld wordt dat aan elkaar tegengestelde levens ook tegengestelde meningen opleveren en dat dit inzicht tot verdraagzaamheid leidt'. This is exactly what makes Nootboom an international writer: crossing borders by acknowledging that others are limited by things such as culture. Yet, this quote also touches the limitations of Dutch critics: their views on literature are examples of restrictions caused by culture, which leads to undervaluation of Nootboom's works.

It might take a while before Dutch critics fully understand what international critics see in Nootboom. Therefore, they have to take a step away from their culture, welcome other cultures and collect a new view on the world. In a time where European countries find common ground, borders are opened and travelling becomes easier, we should consider it possible an international culture is on the rise. And in this line, an international literature as well. Dutch critics should therefore come to understand, as Nootboom pointed out, that opposing lives lead to opposing views in the first place, but will lead to understanding international literature eventually. It is just a matter of time.

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