

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Cees Nooteboom, *The Foxes Come at Night* translated from Dutch by Ina Rilke (Quercus, 2011)

Cees Nooteboom belongs to a generation of Dutch writers who were born before the war and with the death earlier this year of Harry Mulisch (*The Discovery of Heaven*, 1982) Nooteboom is one of the last alive. Unlike Mulisch who wrote relentlessly about the post-war Dutch landscape and whose work is thus closer to Gunther Grass in Germany, Nooteboom is more identifiable with writers such as the much younger Ian Buruma (*Murder in Amsterdam*, 2006) who, if they write about the Netherlands at all, do so from an outsider/expatriate viewpoint. Like Buruma, Nooteboom is an analytical essayist with an extensive oeuvre of travel writing and commentary about the arts. Nooteboom is unique however in that he is an experimenter and thus is not easily classifiable at all. In *The Foxes Come at Night* he pushes the boundaries of what we think of as the short story genre to the furthest edges of his imagination.

Something else to keep in mind in any consideration of Nooteboom is that his father died in an Allied bombing raid during the war. He has known tragic, inexplicable death from an early age and, like Proust who came to realise that he was the subject of his writing, there is a sense that Nooteboom is studying himself in these stories.

A melancholy, the black bile of ancient Greece, pervades all of Nooteboom's work, an attraction to decay, ennui – the end of things. At times *The Foxes Come at Night* reads like a farewell letter, not from author to reader but author to himself. Accordingly, corpses, skeletons, absent friends, ghosts, the fleeting rustle of foxes foraging, 'jaws half open, their sharp little teeth, their sly pointed faces silhouetted against the tent' (134), scamper through these stories. Not as discrete titbits that we might prefer to call short stories, but as eight pieces of a whole work. A work moreover that studies proximity to death from both parts of the divide. The narrator in 'Paula II' gives her version of events from the other side. The music that accompanies all this gloom is Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Ending with: *ist dies etwa der Tod?* Is here death?

The opening story, 'Gondolas', is set in Venice and told from the point of view of a man who remarks that 'Eternal cities tend not to change too much' (10). He is contemplating a photograph that conjures up images of people now dead and; 'hopelessly outdated version of yourself' (10). Trying to feel the absence of a former girlfriend, shockingly under age when he had a sexual relationship with her forty years earlier. After her death his letters to her are returned to be discarded unread on 'ashy, evening coloured water' (24), not far from the Doge's palace. The instrument of dispersal is a gondola. Over the centuries the palace has changed much less than either of the characters have over the course of their lives. But as Venice is supposed to be sinking we are reminded that the 'atavistic' gondolas will transcend palaces, bodies and memories.

The longest story, 'Heinz', is in some ways the most interesting. Nooteboom describes Heinz as an honorary vice-consul, the lowest rank in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is able to display the arms of the royal house at the front of his business. Like Charles Fortnum, the honorary consul in Graham Greene's novel of the same name, Heinz is a hopeless, doomed alcoholic.

Book reviews: *The Foxes Come at Night* by Cees Nooteboom. Elisabeth Holdsworth. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

The narrator of this story contemplates Heinz and his circle captured within yet another photograph and remarks:

Drama in novels or films exists thanks to the denial of duration, since it can be compressed into a few evenings of reading or an hour or two of viewing. Things happen in the real world which you can call dramas, and yet, if you want to turn them into art you have no choice but to converge and compress. (40)

He then segues into a consideration of long nineteenth century novels (Trollope and Stendhal) before reminding us that his story is about the real, the temporal and really nothing much happens, unlike Graham Greene's fictional work which has a dramatic end. Heinz, the honorary consul, drinks himself to death in a setting within the 'hinterland of classical allure' (41) fantasising about Tonga.

The other people in the photograph, including the narrator, are embarked 'on our epic journey from nothing to nowhere', taking with them their inconsequential secrets (44).

Being touched by anything, be it emotion, affection, fleeting joy – is all that most of these characters want at the end of their days. In 'Late September' an elderly woman is visited nightly by a man who is in his sixties. On the way out of her apartment each night the lover takes away some small, valuable object. However, the elderly woman dresses in the clothes of her late husband's first wife, also dead. It is the dead woman's trinkets that the lover steals. The lover is described as 'a clown', a particularly odious brand of cigarette, 'perfect . . . for the likes of you' (89).

After the last horrible encounter between the elderly woman and her younger beau an image from within a silver framed photograph smiles back, 'from the realms of the dead, an ambivalent, half-indulgent smile' (89).

In 'Paula' the narrator begins by saying, 'Ghosts I do not believe in, but photographs are another matter. A woman wants you to think of her, and contrives to make you come across a photograph of her' (101). This narrator lives in a top floor flat, sparsely furnished, overlooking a polder (flat Dutch landscape), his sole decorative possession a photograph of Paula who, forty years earlier, made the cover of *Vogue*.

Paula's frozen image on this man's window-sill is in direct contrast to her death in a fire. However, we are spared the details of her dramatic passing because Paula herself is able to reassure us that 'I lost consciousness, I just drifted out of life unawares' (127). Paula tells us that 'Life' seems a big deal when you're alive but on the other side you find out 'how transparent it is. A spider's web' (132). And, like a spider's web, or the rustle and whisper of foxes, so easily brushed aside. Yet Paula used to sing the Bach cantatas in a church in Amsterdam; an eternal city like Venice. Bach's music, Amsterdam's golden age, the works of writers are the creations of human beings who lived fragile yet important and hopefully enduring lives.

In the midst of this contemplation on ageing and death there does not seem to be much raging against the dying of the light until the last story called appropriately 'The Furthest Point'. This story is a mere three and a half pages. A woman who is no longer young walks two hours to a bleak cliff where she rages 'against rage' at a sea that is sometimes 'the pitch black of a funeral pall' (143) and at other times

glitters. She dances with the wind seemingly content to be buffeted this way and that. Then returns home.

Images frozen in silver photographs, words that can be scattered by gondolas, foxes that stir our remains before we are properly dead and the occasional scream uttered into the void: Nootboom tells us are the things to look forward to at the end. The eternal; edifices, works that we have created, may survive us.

**Elisabeth Holdsworth**