

# Nomadic Literature. The Novels of Cees Nootboom

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## Introduction

By describing literature as nomadic, I want to emphasise the mobility of literary texts which, thanks to the hard work of translators, move easily across borders to make new homes in new languages and cultures. I also want to draw your attention to the Dutch writer Cees Nootboom whose writing has been translated into twenty-six languages, and who makes my point for me. Finally, in a leap from literature as a cultural institution to the fictional world created by Nootboom, I will take philosophical nomadism as a lens through which to view two of his novels. They are *The Following Story* (1991 in Dutch; 1993 in English), and *All Souls' Day* (1998 in Dutch; 2001 in English).

But before turning to Dutch literature, I want to take a moment to look at the wider context in which I work as a scholar of Dutch and Flemish literature and culture. The thoughts that have been preoccupying me for the last few years are intimately connected with the idea of the nomadic and can best be described as metadisciplinary. In other words, they are concerned with the structure and practice of language and culture disciplines. For some time the paradigm for both research and teaching in these disciplines has been shifting away from the study of national languages, literatures and cultures as categories that can be taken for granted, at least as primary categories for the production of knowledge and understanding.

As part of the work of UCL-SOAS Languages of the Wider World CETL, the Centre's research fellow and I asked colleagues working in the fields of education and in less widely taught languages to reflect on language learning using an approach that took human mobility as its starting point. The resulting book *Mobility and Localisation in Language Learning* creates a picture of mobile learners used to a plurilingual environment with a rather flexible approach to learning (to how many languages to learn, which ones, to mobile

devices as aids to learning, to self-directed and collaborative learning). These mobile learners have a sense of shifting personal identity as they discover new cultures, but also of feeling at home with cultural complexity. Rather than generalizing about them, however, the book presents a series of figurations of language learners at the start of the twenty-first century. At the same time, many of the contributions to the volume reveal fascinating tensions always involving institutions, whether a higher education institution where a particular language is taught or national institutions in the 'target' countries seeking to influence classroom practice both inside and outside their borders. Curricula and learning materials embody attitudes to language and culture that enact power struggles – crucially over ownership of a given language and culture. From a perspective of mobility as the basic human mode of being it is no longer understood that a nation should aspire to control its culture beyond its borders.

### **Dutch literary history**

It is for this reason that the literary canon is once more the focus of attention in the field of Dutch Studies. The Dutch and Flemish governments acting through the intergovernmental treaty organization the Dutch Language Union have invested in an impressive literary history. It has been a huge undertaking on the part of the Dutch literary scholars from the Netherlands and Flanders involved in its creation and will provide an invaluable resource for generations of teachers and students. However, there have been several voices from the surprisingly large community of university teachers of Dutch outside the Dutch language area questioning the familiar quasi-national narrative. I use the term 'quasi-national' because this is how the Netherlands and Flanders position themselves in relation to the Dutch language and culture. The voices from outside the Dutch language area (i.e. the Netherlands and Flanders) argue for a rather different canon in which different authors receive attention and emphasis and which pays attention to the role of translated literature. The barriers are coming down, but until very recently, literary history has been made only by nationals working within national borders contributing to a national project. The picture of Dutch literature that emerges is fundamentally static even if it does allow for what might be termed 'foreign influence'. By the

way, this is not intended as a criticism; it is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is fascinating for students as part of the context of Dutch literature.

All historians of Dutch literature – including Ton Anbeek in 2009 in *A Literary History of the Low Countries* edited by my colleague Theo Hermans - agree that there is a strong tradition of realism in Dutch literature. Such realist prose-writing concentrated according to Anbeek ‘on the small, the ordinary, the everyday, and its style is decidedly unpretentious.’ This ‘domestic realism’ was and still is practised by both male and female writers, and it flourished throughout the twentieth century. Some of you may already have travelled in your imaginations to familiar visual representations of Dutch domesticity of the Dutch Golden Age - as in the paintings of Pieter de Hooch which emphasise the serenity of motherhood and satisfaction in everyday tasks. When I survey the national literary canon from the 1880s to the present, the domestic interiors are still there, though they most often harbour suffocating marriages, claustrophobic families and lonely individuals. Fortunately enclosure whether within the walls of the home or the nation, is not the only subject matter of Dutch fiction, nor is realism the only mode of writing. For me, five writers stand out in this period: Louis Couperus (1863-1923), Arthur van Schendel (1874-1946), J.J. Slauerhoff (1898-1936), Hella S. Haasse (1918-) and most recently Cees Nootboom (1933-), all writers who reveal an intensely nomadic imagination in their fiction and poetry.

Turning at last to Nootboom, I believe there are connections between his own nomadic existence and his nomadic characters and themes, *and* between these and the fact that the novels themselves lead intensely nomadic afterlives in translation. And I wonder, in what sense can Cees Nootboom be called a Dutch writer given the mobility of his work and what I have just said about the shortcomings of the national paradigm for the study of literature? One reason why I have chosen Cees Nootboom as the main subject of this lecture is that he seems to have found a way of resolving the tension between a nomadic existence and sensibility on the one hand and maintaining a connection with what for the moment I will simply call Dutchness on the other. He is not the only one. Jan Jacob Slauerhoff famously opened the poem ‘In

Nederland' with the line 'In Nederland wil ik niet leven' (or, in the translation by Paul Vincent) 'Holland's no place for me to live'). Here are the last two stanzas of the poem:

Ik wil niet in die smalle huizen wonen,  
 Die Leelijkheid in steden en in dorpen  
 Bij duizendtallen heeft geworpen...  
 Daar loopen allen met een stijve boord  
 - Uit stijlgevoel niet, om te toonen  
 Dat men wel weet hoe het behoort –  
 Des Zondags om elkaar te groeten  
 De straten door in zwarte stoeten.

In Nederland wil ik niet blijven,  
 Ik zou dichtgroeien en verstijven.  
 Het gaat mij daar te kalm, te deftig,  
 Men spreekt er langzaam, wordt nooit heftig,  
 En danst nooit op het slappe koord.  
 Wel worden weerlozen gekweld,  
 Nooit wordt zoo'n plumpe boerenkop gesneld,  
 En nooit, neen nooit gebeurt een mooie passieoord. (*Verzameld werk II*, p. 338)

(In poky houses I'll not live  
 Which Ugliness spawned on this shore  
 In towns and villages galore.  
 All walk stiff-collared, in black droves  
 -- Not stylishly, but just to give  
 The feeling they know what behoves.  
 Each citizen the other greets,  
 Parading through the Sunday streets.

There life's too stolid, too sedate,  
 Men weigh their words, dispassionate.  
 They'd never stick their own necks out,

The helpless, though, they single out.  
 No headhunted trophy this far north  
 No glorious crime of passion ever blazes forth.<sup>1</sup>

Slauerhoff was true to his poetic word and signed up as a ship's doctor, working on the Java-China-Japan line. And the opening line of the poem 'Woninglooze' (Homeless) makes it clear that a nomad's home can be anywhere and nowhere, and still be home: 'Alleen in mijn gedichten kan ik wonen' (Nowhere but in my poems can I dwell) And these poems are written in Dutch.

Nootboom, too, has found a way of being nomadic *and* of embracing his Dutchness at the same time. It is by detaching language from nation. He describes the Dutch language as 'the love of my life' and 'the reason why the centre of my being is here in the Netherlands and not anywhere else.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Nootboom: a condensed life history**

And now I want to introduce you properly to Cees Nootboom. Cornelis Johannes Jacobus Maria Nootboom was born in The Hague on 31.7.1933. The author himself has maintained that he has no recollection at all of his early school years, for example in the book of travel reflections called *Nootbooms hotel*. A researcher putting together an exhibition on Nootboom in The Hague managed to establish that the family moved eight times between Cees's birth and the outbreak of war in 1940.<sup>3</sup> This information seems to provide Nootboom with a satisfactory explanation for his amnesia:

And actually, it fits perfectly: precisely because of moving house so much, the memory fails. The file is languishing somewhere in the dungeons of the shaken memory, and unless and until it is retrieved

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<sup>1</sup> 'In Holland...' translated by Paul Vincent, *The Low Countries 1999-2000*, p. 172; here slightly adapted by me.

<sup>2</sup> My translation of '[...]de liefde van mijn leven' and 'de reden waarom [...] het centrum van mijn bestaan zich hier bevindt en niet ergens anders'. In Földényi (ed.) *In het oog van de storm*, p.244.

<sup>3</sup> Dick Welsink, 'Cees Nootboom: een leven in data' (Cees Nootboom: a life in dates) in Harry Bekkering, Daan Cartens, Aad Meinderts (eds.), *Ik had wel duizend levens en ik nam er maar één! Cees Nootboom*, Schrijversprentenboek 40, Amsterdam/Antwerp: Atlas, [1997], p. 149.

thanks to some Proustian conjuring trick, it will continue to moulder away down there.<sup>4</sup>

Nooteboom goes on to say that he has chosen not to retrieve the past by means of psychoanalysis. To an outsider there are at least two events that are worth mentioning because they must have been traumatic, particularly against the background of instability whether through moving house or as a result of life in a country under German occupation: Nooteboom's father left the family in 1943 and two years later was killed in a bombardment in The Hague.

Having attended four different schools in as many towns, it is hardly surprising that Nooteboom did not complete his secondary education, leaving home and school in 1951. It was before he left school that he made his first journey beyond the borders of the Netherlands, a cycling trip to Belgium and Luxemburg. He did continue his education at evening school while working in a bank during the day, but has no memories of taking his final exam. This was followed in 1952 by a trip to Brussels and Paris, the first stage by train, the second hitch-hiking.<sup>5</sup> In 1953 he made two hitch-hiking trips, one to Italy and one to the South of France via Denmark.<sup>6</sup> His first novel, *Philip and the Others*, published in Dutch in 1955 (and in English in 1988), can be described as a hitch-hiking novel. The following year, he published his first volume of poetry and his first piece of journalism, an article for the Amsterdam daily newspaper *Het Parool* on the Hungarian uprising. More travels followed when he signed up as a merchant seaman with the Surinam Shipping Company at the suggestion of his future father-in-law and worked his passage to the Caribbean where he sought permission to marry Fanny Lichtveld. In November of 1957 they married in New York. In the years that followed he published stories, more poems, a play and another novel in 1963. The

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<sup>4</sup> Cees Nooteboom, *Nootebooms hotel*, Amsterdam/Antwerp, 2002, p. 288. At this point it is worth noting that the English version – *Nomad's hotel* - does not contain this piece at all, so the translation here is mine, as are all subsequent translations from the Dutch version.

<sup>5</sup> Cees Nooteboom, *Rode regen* (Red rain), Amsterdam/Antwerp, 2007, p. 102ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 110ff.

following year he and Fanny divorced – a time of deep crisis according to the author himself.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1960s he worked as a roving columnist for the Dutch daily newspaper *De Volkskrant*, and in 1969 won a journalism prize for his account of the May revolution of 1968. He then became travel and poetry editor of the magazine *Avenue* where he also made his name as a translator. His next novel did not appear until 1980: *Rituelen* (*Rituals*, c1983). This was his first work of fiction to attract attention outside the Netherlands; it was awarded the Mobil Pegasus Prize which was set up to cover the cost of translation of 'foreign' fiction into English. By 1985 *Rituelen* had also been translated into French and German. All Nootboom's subsequent fiction has appeared in English within two or three years of its publication in Dutch. According to the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation*, it was *The Following Story* that signalled Cees Nootboom's international breakthrough; it won the European Aristeion Prize and was translated into over twenty languages.<sup>8</sup> From this potted biography it is clear that a nomadic non-national paradigm is better able to encompass the literary phenomenon that is Nootboom. What place, then, does Dutchness have in all of this?

### **Nootboom and Dutchness**

The basic facts of the writer's Dutchness are that he was born into a Dutch family on Dutch territory, grew up speaking Dutch and was educated through the medium of the Dutch language. On receiving an honorary doctorate from the Free University of Berlin in 2008, he himself distinguished between his writerly self and 'my legal person as a citizen of the Netherlands [...] who stands here before you because he is about to receive an honorary doctorate.'<sup>9</sup> There is much more than Nootboom the Dutchman. The title of an earlier volume of prose-poetry which appeared in 1993 also seems to

<sup>7</sup> Jan Brokken, 'De voorbije passages van Cees Nootboom' in Daan Cartens (ed.), *Over Cees Nootboom*, The Hague: BZZTÔH, 1984, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Fenoulhet, 'Cees Nootboom' in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation*, pp. 1007-8.

<sup>9</sup> Cees Nootboom, 'De bevochten lichtheid' in *Vrij Nederland* 31.1.2009, cited from LiteRom 27.3.2009.

suggest a multiple sense of self which can be expressed poetically, but not literally: *Self-portrait of another*.

In search of complexity and depth, I turn to the writer's own utterances on the his sense of his own identity and belonging. Much of the material is indirect, subtle and what follows is a composite narrative of mine rather than the author's. Although Nootboom's early life history was lived within the boundaries of the Dutch state, it deviates from what might be called the Dutch norm: the sheer instability of the family was unusual, and although catholics were no longer a minority group, social apartheid along religious lines was institutionalised in the Netherlands which meant that catholics had their own separate educational, welfare, sports and other organizations. Nootboom himself is quite clear that it is his protestant 'reformed' colleagues for whom religion plays a part in their writing; he is not troubled by religious 'hang-ups'. At the same time he notes: 'I am extraordinarily content with my catholic upbringing. An upbringing full of *rituals*.'<sup>10</sup>

Nootboom has not written an autobiography as such, though there are short pieces that contain reflections and musings on his life both past and present. These are found embedded in the books that are generally described as travel writing, and in the texts of speeches made when accepting prizes and honorary doctorates. He resists the very notion of identity itself, at least if it is taken to be something unitary and singular. It is this acceptance of multiplicity that led me to look to philosophical nomadism as an approach to Nootboom's work.

The preface to the English translation of the first novel, *Philip and the Others* which appeared 33 years after the Dutch novel, opens with the words:

A long time ago, an eternity of over thirty years, a young man with whom I share a first name sat down in the municipal library of a provincial town in the Netherlands. He was going to write this book. By the uninterrupted machinations of time I have stopped resembling him;

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Brokken, 'De voorbije passages van Cees Nootboom', p.11.

and when they show me a photograph of this thin, romantic stranger, I am aware of the cruel distortion of his youthful features that has become my face.

He, in his day, had already been marked by the chaos of war and a medieval upbringing in an Augustinian monastery school; but somehow he had managed to keep a dream intact that had nothing to do with his, or with Dutch, outward reality.<sup>11</sup>

Nootboom 'fictionalises' his past self, making the distance between his narrating and narrated selves visible through the use of the third person to refer to his past self, alongside the narrating 'I'.

Some twenty years later when Nootboom returns to the same theme in *Rode regen* (Red rain), he describes himself not only as a completely other person but also as someone he doesn't really like. 'You don't want to have been that person, easily infatuated, romantic, an emerging person who would take a very long time before he amounted to much.'<sup>12</sup> Another part of the self-narrative is the account of the young Nootboom's love of reading and unusual choice of books— what he wryly calls the 'delicious years of untutored lust for reading'.<sup>13</sup> Lacking guidance, he read 'great' writers like Voltaire, Sappho and Cervantes alongside more popular Dutch and Flemish novels. In his acceptance speech on being given an honorary doctorate at the Catholic University of Brussels he talks about his lack of a university education, his love of reading and learning and he admits to being envious of erudition in his 'secret autodidact's heart'.<sup>14</sup>

I have spent some time distilling this narrative of becoming because the revelation of personal detail from his formative years has been so carefully and tantalisingly dosed over a long writing career. Most recently, Nootboom has begun to write about another life on the island of Menorca:

I have two lives, it seems, one over there where I come from, a life that is growing shadowy, it doesn't really exist. The other is here, I had only

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<sup>11</sup> Cees Nootboom, tr. Adrienne Dixon, *Philip and the Others*, Baton Rouge, 1988, p. v.

<sup>12</sup> *Rode regen*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> *Nootbooms hotel*, p. 304.

interrupted it. You can't add them together to equal two whole lives, and yet it does seem as though life lasts longer. The other life is one of people, events, journeys. In that other life, times change, they are called arrival, the time of your plane, appointment, here time is sand, all I have to do is turn it the other way up each day and the same grains mark the same hours. (*Nootbooms hotel*, p. 330)

Home is where the nomad decides to stop travelling. Dutchness never quite disappears, though it fades dramatically. It seems as though the Netherlands, the country of Nootboom's birth, makes few claims on him for at least some of the time when he is at his house in Menorca, and perhaps when he is travelling. His story suggests that this is a pattern that became ingrained early on and that is integral to his development as a writer. His early curiosity for and encounters with non-Dutch writers seem to have been translated into curiosity for other places, languages, and cultures, and his liberation through discovery of the nomad in himself was both personal and artistic.

### **The novels of Cees Nootboom**

In the last part of the lecture I will show you some examples of nomadic literature, starting with the extreme mobility of the novel *In the Dutch Mountains*. This novel has been translated into 13 languages, has embarked on thirteen 'afterlives', to use Walter Benjamin's term. Here are some of its incarnations represented by the covers of the novel in English, French, German and Dutch.<sup>15</sup> That a novel like this leads its own life in the new culture where it is read and received differently is already clear from the very different interpretations represented by the covers. Current research in the field of translation studies/Dutch Studies asks questions like To what extent does the novel's author have an input into the new text? What role to publishers and intermediaries, especially translators play? And is the intercultural traffic one-way? In fact, the title of *In the Dutch Mountains* provides a small piece of evidence of two-way traffic. Originally published as *In Nederland* (In the Netherlands) it was the English translator, Adrienne Dixon who came up with

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<sup>14</sup> *Nootbooms hotel*, p.306.

the quasi-geographical title which perfectly captures the novel's imaginary setting of a mountainous region of the Southern Netherlands. As you see from the second Dutch title *In de Nederlandse bergen*, this clever title has been translated back into Dutch, superseding the original title. On a much larger scale, scholars agree that Nootboom's highly positive reception in Germany paved the way for a more favourable reception in the Netherlands. And his collected works have appeared in German, but not in Dutch. In other words, which language and culture is primary in the reception of Cees Nootboom? At the very least, the fact that at one level the answer is German, complicates our understanding of Nootboom's Dutchness, and of the notion of Dutch literature.

So far I have considered Nootboom's nomadic, deterritorialised way of life, and – briefly - the mobility of his novels which have found homes in new languages and cultures. Now I want to pursue the idea that there is a connection between this nomadic kind of existence and the state of mind which embraces differences, and change. To do this, I will turn briefly to the work of the feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, in particular *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), *Metamorphoses* (2002) and *Transformations* (2006). Braidotti builds on and transforms some of the central concepts of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, but as she is not my focus today, I will not expound her philosophy, but rather take up certain ideas that I have found to open up and illuminate works of literature. Braidotti herself frequently discusses writers and their work in her philosophy. As indeed does Deleuze himself.

Braidotti proposes the figuration of the nomadic subject as a way of thinking about the constitution of subjectivity in the kind of mobile world I have been talking about. The nomadic subject can take into account the complexities that arise from plurilingualism and multiple allegiances; or from the intersection of gender, age, ethnicity, class and race. In keeping with this idea of the complex, multilayered subject, philosophical nomadism uses a rhizomic, or branching mode of thinking which rejects the traditional notion of 'logical' argument and

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately I do not have permission to reproduce them here.

is constantly shifting. As you may have noticed, I have tried to employ it in this lecture. Nomadism, according to Braidotti, privileges processes of becoming above states of being. 'Becoming' is an important concept in her vitalist philosophy as it allows for new subject-formations rather than fixed identities. Following Deleuze, Braidotti proposes different 'becomings' which can all be seen as a movement towards the margins away from the dominant centre. Since as a feminist, Braidotti sees this centre as the location of masculinist power she adopts the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming woman' to mark a set of transformations to which both women and men must gain access if they aspire to nomadic subjectivity. As Braidotti puts it in *Metamorphoses*

[...] in fact, the 'becoming-woman' marks the threshold of patterns of 'becoming minoritarian' that cross through the animal and go into the 'becoming imperceptible' and beyond. (p.119)

In my readings of two of Nooteboom's novels in the final part of this lecture, I aim to reveal such 'becomings': becoming-woman, becoming-imperceptible and becoming-animal in Nooteboom's central characters.

Nooteboom is not the only writer to display nomadic sensibilities in this way; and I certainly do not mean to imply that he does so as a result of reading Deleuze or Braidotti. The philosophers are proposing a new way of thinking about subjectivity which is already out there. Deleuze and his collaborator Felix Guattari, for example, write about Kafka's minor use of a major language as Czech Jew writing in German; and they go on to show how Kafka's writing enacts many becomings, the most obvious being the novella *Metamorphosis* in which Gregor Samsa wakes up to the realization that he is a 'gigantic insect', a 'becoming-animal', to quote Braidotti, 'which is never just reproduction or imitation. The becoming-animal entails movements, vibrations, and threshold-crossings.' (*Metamorphoses*, p.163).

Cees Nooteboom's short novel *The Following Story* also opens with its protagonist, Herman Mussert, waking up with the sensation that he has changed. For a start, he is in a hotel in Lisbon having gone to bed in Amsterdam:

I have never had an exaggerated interest in my own person, but unfortunately that did not imply I could stop thinking about myself at will, from one moment to the next. And that morning I certainly had something to think about. [...]

I had woken up with the ridiculous feeling that I might be dead, but whether I was actually dead, or had been dead, or vice versa, I could not ascertain. Death, I had learned was nothingness, and if that was the state you were in, as I had also learned, all deliberation ceased. (p. 5)

It is possible to describe *The Following Story* as a cliché in novel form, the cliché being that your life flashes before you at the point of death.

Mussert again:

There were two possibilities: either it was not my room, or this wasn't me, and in that case these were not my eyes nor my ears, since not only were these beams narrower than those in my bedroom on the Keizersgracht, but also, and more importantly, in Amsterdam I had no one living upstairs to importune me with his or her invisible passion. I just lay there motionless, if only to get used to the idea that my eyes were perhaps not my eyes. Which is just a roundabout way of saying that I lay there utterly still because I was scared to death of being someone else. (p. 6-7)

During the course of the novel the dying Herman Mussert in bed in Amsterdam becomes himself as he was twenty years before; a classics teacher, aka Socrates. When asked by the biology teacher who was to become his lover to tell her what he thinks 'we' humans are, he replies: 'A cluster of composite, endlessly altering circumstances and functions which we address as 'I'. What else can I say? We act as if it is fixed and unchangeable, but it changes all the time until it is discarded.' (p. 44)

The man born Herman Mussert does not reveal a fixed identity, but rather a multiple, nomadic subjectivity signalled up to a point by his aliases: Socrates, the schoolteacher and Dr Strabo the travel guide writer. Lisbon is the location for the period of greatest intensity in this loner's life - his unlikely love affair

with the biology teacher. In the end, a fight in the playground between Socrates and the biology teacher's husband (another teacher) loses Mussert his job, and results in the death of a pupil and injury to the husband in a car crash after the fight. It was after this that Dr Strabo's wanderings began.

The novel enacts a becoming; it narrates death as a process of becoming: in this case, becoming-imperceptible. In Lisbon, Mussert embarks on a boat (another cliché) where during the crossing the passengers each tell their own story of dying, all the time becoming imperceptible:

Our bodies seemed undecided as to whether they wanted to be there; I had seldom seen a group of people with so much missing, every now and again entire knees, shoulders, feet disappeared from view, but our eyes were not in the least disconcerted, they filled in whatever was missing whenever things got too bad, sought out the eyes of the others, as if thereby to exorcise the threat of wholesale disappearance. (p. 85)

In this fictional world, death is a positive process in which the physical body is left behind for a dreamt or remembered body. Helped by the novel's title, its ending: 'And then I told her, then I told you

the following story'

creates the impression that this is the story that has just been read. So the novel offers the possibility of eternity through the return to the beginning of the narrative. Nootboom represents death as the discarding of the physical body which goes its own way becoming molecules and atoms. Death is also the end of the narrating self as an embodied subject. What remains is the text, this slim novel representing what Braidotti calls a 'synthesis between reason, the memory and the imagination.' Put more simply, again quoting Braidotti, 'It makes the subject into something that "will continue to have been"<sup>16</sup> in stories and memories.

The main character of *All Soul's Day* is a Dutch film-maker, Arthur Daane, who is living in Berlin. He makes documentaries and tv programmes to earn a

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<sup>16</sup> *Transpositions*, p.240.

living, and has his own nomadic project which is to film the in-between: twilight, the grey zone between night and day, day and night.

Whenever anyone asked him what he did with all that footage, he found it hard to come up with an honest answer, or at any rate one he was willing to articulate. No, it wasn't the tag end of something else. No, it wasn't part of a project, unless you wanted to call his whole life a project. [...] Half an hour later he emerged from the U-Bahn at Potsdamer Platz: the place Victor had brought him to after their first meeting, the place where he'd had his first lesson on Berlin. No one who had seen this city when it was divided could ever forget what it had been like. Could not forget, would not be able to describe it, not be able to tell the real story. Here he was now, alone, out on the hunt, but for what? For something he'd seen then and would never see again? Or perhaps for what had been there before, familiar to him only from photographs? (p. 52-3)

He shares his footage with a philosopher friend who points out that Arthur has put himself in the film in the form of a shadow, but with the camera invisible.

"An invisible signature. But that's a paradox."

"You noticed it, didn't you?"

"Is it because you want to go on living after you're dead?"

No it seemed logical, but that wasn't it.

When nobody knew or noticed his presence, that's when he would no longer be there, would become part of all that had vanished. But you could hardly say you wanted to disappear along with the rest when you were putting together a collection to save them all, could you?" (p. 65)

Here Nooteboom imagines becoming-imperceptible as an art form.

The nomad, as Braidotti puts it, 'stands for the relinquishing and deconstruction of any fixed identity and resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. It is the subversion of a set of conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling.'<sup>17</sup> Arthur Daane

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<sup>17</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'Difference, Diversity and Nomadic Subjectivity', 2002, <http://women.ped.kun.nl/cbt/rosilecture.html> [accessed 1.10.10]

may travel a great deal, but his nomadic state in the philosophical sense described by Braidotti is beyond doubt. Not only has he left the conventional Dutch way of life behind, as a film-maker he also resists the conventions for making a meaningful film. And though his sexual encounter with and emotional attachment to the research student Elik Oranje may be normatively heterosexual, their pairing resists any traces of a patriarchal pattern of behaviour.

The travel that comes with Arthur's work brings more complexity to his life and to his subjectivity. During the novel he films in Estonia and Japan. The removal to another culture is described as stepping into another life, becoming another person who is at the same time still Arthur. I should perhaps reassure you that *All Souls' Day* does have a plot, other characters and a preoccupation with history, memory, trauma, and sausages, but you'll have to read it to find out about them. The climax of the novel happens when Arthur goes to Spain in search of Elik Oranje and is the victim of a violent street attack which leaves him in hospital with head injuries. It also marks the culmination of a process of becoming, this time a kind of becoming-woman. Actually, Arthur's actions and interactions in the novel reveal no overtly masculinist tendencies at all – he has all but 'become-woman'. During the healing process he abandons the last vestige of traditional manly behaviour: he frequently cries openly in the hospital; and when his friends come to visit, he weeps, he sheds tears.

There is an extraordinary epilogue to the novel in which Arthur, having recovered, is on his way back from Spain. The mood is quiet, almost expectant. We have reached the point where Arthur Daane's personal film project, his temporary relationship with Elik Oranje, and his recovery from physical trauma take his nomadic subjectivity beyond becoming-woman to the point of becoming-animal. I will read you the penultimate paragraph of *All Soul's Day*, my last quotation from *Nooteboom* in English, and then leave you with some closing remarks.

Evening had set in. It wasn't quite dark yet. The man came out of the inn and walked down to the river. He began filming something, though

it was hard to see what it might be, unless it was the dancing light as the sun's last rays bounced off the water, silvery glints that slowly dissolved in the approaching twilight. After that he went back inside. In the night he was awakened by a desperate wail, a hoarse cry that answered itself and was so unmistakably mournful that our language even has a separate verb for it, so that the man in the inn wanted to throw his arms around the donkey's neck and comfort him. (p. 337-8)

Despite Braidotti's assertion that the nomad as a figuration of subjectivity is about the subversion of conventions rather than the literal act of travelling, there is no doubt that the two kinds of boundary crossings frequently go together. Most definitely so in the case of Nootboom and his characters. Readers, on the other hand, do not need to go anywhere to open themselves to this unsettling nomadic world in which individuals choose multiplicity above stasis and solidity. As Deleuze and Guattari say: 'How many styles, or genres, or literary movements, even very small ones, have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language. Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor.'<sup>18</sup> I hope I have shown how Cees Nootboom does just this in his fiction.

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