CHAPTER TWO

EVERT'S WORLD

Evil deeds

The borders of Woerden formed the horizon of Evert’s first world. If we wish to understand the full thrust of his message, we have to inquire into the structure and content of that early environment. The network of relationships revealed in Evert’s messages seems at first sight very limited in scope. Evert’s “dearly beloved Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ” (b7, b9) comprise the orphanage and its young residents, his close relatives, his employer and his teacher, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in the town, and a few opponents. Only indirectly do we hear of a world outside Woerden. But the information Evert passes on to us is a selection from the pool of knowledge that he acquired either directly or indirectly. And that selection presupposes that he synthesized his knowledge into a worldview of his own. Although we have no direct access to that worldview, we can reconstruct it in rough outline from the information that Evert considered crucial enough to share with us. That communication reaches us through a second filter, for Evert translated his picture of the world into the terms he learned in the orphanage, in catechism, school, and church. It is a world of “evil deeds” (a2). God is angered because of our sins, he keeps repeating. “Repent of your sins before it is too late. If you do not cease from sinning, God will visit us. Pray that God will forbear, for God will visit us. But pray that God will forbear: for God is greatly angered, o people. Our sins have risen high before God, and they call for vengeance” (a4).

These are largely clichés—but clichés can be seen as the understandably clumsy attempts of a young man to gain a verbal grip on all that goes on in the world and to make value judgments about it. Oral information and visual experience, rumor and conversation formed the age-old basis for such judgments, but since the fifteenth century there was also an ever-increasing flood of visual information provided by books and prints. The clichés were fed by the devout literature that circulated in Evert’s environment: edifying booklets, pamphlets,
emblem books, perhaps a few prints. The pious authors scrupulously supplied biblical references, but were cautious about naming specific sins and sinners.

It would, of course, be naïve to assume links of cause and effect between concrete misdeeds in the local or regional community and Evert’s indictment of sins in the world. For that his individual power of expression was still too underdeveloped and too dependent on the established Calvinist language that surrounded him from his birth. Yet the boy must have experienced the pious clichés as relevant. For Evert to accept the fire-and-brimstone sermons of the town’s orthodox Calvinist ministers like Jacobus van Cralingen and even Henricus Alutarius as adequate interpretive forms for his own worldview, he must have been able to forge from his perceptions a meaningful synthesis of image and reality. He must, in short, have been able to invest the clichés with a concrete meaning and to recognize them as relevant to his everyday life. The world was the stage of God’s judgments. God revealed His will there in signs, miracles, and punishments. The mechanism was simple. When the Amsterdam burgomaster Reinier Pauw (1564–1636), a stern Calvinist, declared that the linden tree in front of his house could wither if he had anything to do with counterfeiting, God made the tree wither within 24 hours, a pamphlet from 1624 reported. But there was more to the classic miracle of punishment than met the eye, as perceptive observers realized: Pauw had been chief judge of the court that condemned grand pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt to death in 1619; now he would face judgment himself. There were lessons to be learned from history and current events: a victory was a sign of divine grace, a disaster a sign of punishment. Evert gained

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2 Copy van een seecker boexcken dat onlanckx is wt ghegaen, Tracterende van een Miraeckel oft Spectadel, dat te Amsterdam gheschiet is van eenen groenen Lindeboom… (Antwerp, s.a. [1620]) [copy in Bibliotheca Thysiana, Leiden, n° 2712; cat. Petit, n° 1274]. On burgomaster Reinier Pauw: NVBW, IX, 769–776.