

HERMINE DE GRAAF (1951- )  
I FEAR, THEREFORE I AM

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Hermine de Graaf, born in Winschoten in 1951, is one of the most interesting new Dutch female authors of the past five years. Her debut in 1984 with *De kaart, niet het gebied* ("The map, not the area"), a collection of short stories, was very well received and won the Geertjan Lubberhuizen Award (named after the late director of the publishing firm De Bezige Bij in Amsterdam). She subsequently published three more books: *De Zeevlam* (1985, short stories),<sup>1</sup> *Aanklacht tegen onbekend* ("Charge against unknown," 1987, short stories, nominated for the prestigious AKO Award<sup>2</sup>) and *De regels van het huis* ("The rules of the house," 1988, novella).

De Graaf is undeniably a very original talent. Her work is idiosyncratic, written in a personal style that could not be mistaken for that of any other writer. Critics who habitually look for literary influences in the work of beginning writers have mentioned Vestdijk's *Anton Wachter*-novels and *Werther Nieland* by Gerard Reve. While it is certainly true that there is a thematic resemblance between these books and those of de Graaf (the struggle for life of adolescents in the confusing and hostile world of grownups), in the matters of style and literary technique she has nothing in common with these two authors. Nevertheless, one can agree with Jaap Goedegebuure's observation in his review in *De Haagse Post* (3-3-1984) that de Graaf's style is reminiscent of the prose of Georg Trakl. If one wants to place de Graaf in a literary tradition, then it should be in that of expressionism and surrealism. Those readers seeking straightforwardly realistic stories would do better to avoid reading Hermine de Graaf.

With the surrealists she shares a fascination with the magical world of the subconscious, the zone in the mind where reality and fiction come together. Her stories have the same mysterious quality and the same richness of powerful images as the surrealists. The story line itself is hardly ever completely defined; rather, the reader must reconstruct the actual plot out of small bits and pieces of information. There is always a strong suggestion of sexuality and aggression, although the main characters are usually young teenage girls. But there is nothing girlish in these stories

and they are obviously not written especially for girls. The world which we enter here is bewildering, ominous and sometimes even shocking.

The mysterious atmosphere with which readers find themselves confronted is caused not only by an enigmatic plot, but is especially the result of the perspective which de Graaf seems to prefer, that of the unstable adolescent mind. The protagonists are virtually always displaced persons, hypersensitive and "overspannen" because of certain traumatic experiences in their past, experiences which in most instances are not even completely revealed. The protagonists lack the security and protection of family life; their parents are either absent (divorced, dead, in prison) or, and this applies especially to mothers, simply unable to establish a relationship of mutual trust with their children. De Graaf's young heroines are physically and emotionally isolated, suffering from a feeling of lost identity. The central emotion in her work is that of *angst*, existential anguish. Although some of the main characters have nervous disorders (such as eating or sleeping problems) and are therefore sent to psychiatrists, the stories never turn into case histories. This is because de Graaf gives us the inside view; the characters tell their own story, and we look at the world through their eyes.

To express the effect of alienation her characters experience, de Graaf skillfully uses techniques developed in the period of expressionism. To express feelings of disintegration and depersonalization, the

scene of action, either a social setting or a natural environment, is not extensively described, but analyzed into small alarming details, which are merely mentioned, put side by side without any comment. As a result the whole atmosphere seems to be charged with electricity and the reader cannot escape from an intense feeling of discomfort and uneasiness.

The central conflict in most stories is the collision between two totally incompatible attitudes to life. On the one side there are the dreamers, the nonconformists, those who are still susceptible to the magical force of nature and the creative force of language. This group is usually represented by children and adolescents, mentally retarded or psychotic adults, and in one case, the beautiful story "Hermine bezoekt haar grootmoeder" in *Aanklacht*, by an old woman who is no longer in command of her mental functions. All of these characters have one thing in common: they have an unconditioned way of looking at things, through their eyes things look different, unfamiliar. By means of language and imagination they create a purely private inner world and use this as a buffer against attacks coming from the other camp, that of the conformists, the empty-headed materialists, slaves of rules and conventions, kings of intolerance and hypocrisy, in other words, in de Graaf's way of thinking, of "normal" adults.

For de Graaf's young heroines the unwelcome transition from childhood to adulthood is frequently symbolized by the first menstruation, a leading motif in several stories. In "Menarche, tiende levensjaar; geen bijzonderheden" (*De kaart*) the ten-year-old tomboy Lisa has to deal with the hard fact that she now has become "a real woman." This unfortunate event happens to coincide with her family's move to another house, an equally unwanted occurrence. During a secret visit to the old house, a treasured symbol of her childhood but doomed to make way for a new bank building, Lisa works herself into a frenzy

and knocks down every single piece of remaining furniture.

This aggressive reaction is typical for de Graaf's characters. In an interview she once said that she did not want to depict women as victims, since that had already been done enough in literature. Her heroines had to have a fighting spirit, they had to stand up for themselves. And so they do. Corinne in "Wildsporen" (*De kaart*) drives a herd of wild pigs into the village; Claire in "Elke nacht wachten op Mischa" (*De kaart*) pushes her mother down the stairs; Luna in "Waar is de horizon?" (*De Zeevlam*) serves poisoned food to her family and Anna in "In verzekerde bewaring" (*Aanklacht*) kills the boy who raped her. The wonderful opening story of *Aanklacht tegen onbekend* ("De moeder, de zoon en het hondje") is, because of its gruesome ending in combination with its light-hearted tone, slightly reminiscent of the horror stories by Roald Dahl. The leading character is a four-year-old fatherless boy who is greatly neglected by his frivolous mother. He is suffering from many nervous disorders such as bedwetting and self-mutilation, for which his mother hates him. His only friend is a rocking horse, his worst enemy his mother's little poodle. Pulled into this boy's fantasy world we witness the killing of a fierce coyote by a courageous cowboy on a faithful horse: the boy stabs the dog to death with his mother's letter opener. De Graaf implies the positive significance of this horrible event, for afterwards the boy notices that his pants are still dry.

The use of language and imagination as a protective shield against fear and anguish is a recurrent theme in de Graaf's stories. In the title story of *De kaart, niet het gebied*, the main character, sixteen year old Vera, has her own philosophy about the origins of fear and the way of coping with it: fear is not something one is born with, it arises the moment one looks up at the sky to observe the cosmos. As a child Vera used to be afraid of the moon and she tried to exorcise her fear by muttering words and phrases to

herself. In the story "Prazske JARO" (*De kaart*) the young woman Bella develops the theory that nursery rhymes and songs in general help people to overcome their fear of the unexpected and the incomprehensible. In the title story of *De Zeevlam* we see this theory put into practise by young Katja who, in a moment of peril, starts to sing an incoherent mix of Dutch nursery rhymes.

The world which Hermine de Graaf evokes does not have much in common with the ordinary world in which we live. In an interview she said that she received numerous letters from angry readers who claimed that young girls could not possibly be as she described them. This is undoubtedly a true observation (although some wishful thinking may be involved here), but what is more pertinent is the fact that it is clearly not de Graaf's intention to copy reality. Her stories are simply too nightmarish to have a mimetic function, even if one agrees that the world is not always such a wonderful place in which to live. What these stories actually do is stir up the reader's own latent feelings of fear. What one remembers of these stories afterwards is not their plot, but the atmosphere of alienation, as if one had just visited another planet. The stories explore the hidden realm of the fears which we are so used to covering with a thick blanket of daily habits and routines. The stories make

us see and feel how closely life is related to death, how fragile and vulnerable humans are, and how weak their grip on a world that is fundamentally incomprehensible. From this perspective *angst* appears as the most authentic emotion one could have. As Vera in "De kaart, niet het gebied" puts it: if you are afraid to hurt yourself, then you do exist, because "somebody who does not exist cannot bleed." In de Graaf's conception it is fear itself that is the ultimate proof of one's existence: I fear, therefore I am. So de Graaf's characters, although it may seem difficult to identify with them because of their youth and their childlike way of reasoning, confront us with the fundamental problems of our own existence.

Those who may not be interested in such a confrontation might find a number of other things to enjoy in Hermine de Graaf's work, such as the portraits of a number of unusually willful girls, the often surprising technique of intertextuality, in that one story refers to another, and finally the clever way in which de Graaf uses criticism of her earlier work as material for a new story. Readers wanting to acquaint themselves with her work might be especially advised to begin with *De kaart, niet het gebied*, which in my opinion is still her best book.<sup>3</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Literally: the sea flame, i.e. a mist coming from the sea usually without reaching the area of the dunes.

<sup>2</sup> A yearly prize of fl. 50,000 for the best literary achievement, awarded by the Dutch bookstore chain "Ako."

<sup>3</sup> I was not able to include de Graaf's latest novel, *Stella Klein*, in the discussion here.

## Works by Hermine de Graaf

- De kaart, niet het gebied*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1984.  
*De Zeevlam*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1985.  
*Aanklacht tegen onbekend*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1987.  
*De regels van het huis*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1988.  
*Stella Klein*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1990.