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**Family Keepers : On the Contemporary Family Novel in Flanders and the Netherlands**

In March 2006, the Belgian weekly *Knack* published an issue on the popularity of genealogy in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> More and more people - in Belgium, but also in the UK and the Netherlands - are fascinated by their family tree. They collect ancestors as others collect stamps. This fashion is arguably part of a larger social evolution in which the whole concept of "heritage" becomes more and more important. It is related to our need for anchorage in these confusing and uncertain times of globalisation and modernisation. People look for things to identify themselves by, and often they find some answers in the past.

*Identity and Origin*

One of the most persistent ideas about identity in western thought, indeed, seems to be that our identity lies in our past, and especially in our memory of that past. Memory often comes in the shape of a story. Telling a story about our past means making a selection of our memories and ordering them. It also means forgetting, leaving out, concealing. Some things gain significance, and others lose significance through narration.

Narrative structures are not individual and particular, but rather culturally defined, as Christine van Boheemen points out in her book *The Novel as Family Romance*: "We may cherish the feeling that our stories are the product of our unique individuality and that they reflect our personal interests and experience. Of course they do, but the

forms we use, the structures by which we create order and meaning – the logical or conceptual operations that organize experience – are inherited. The significance of our stories derives from their relation to the models of signification operative in our society – causality, centrism, linearity, and teleology – which are our inescapable unconscious heritage."<sup>2</sup>

The genre of the family novel is one of those western narrative structures that has been crucial in embodying such values as linearity and teleology and in establishing people's identity in their past, their origin, their descent. The popularity of the family novel in our literature has to do with our valorization of the concept of origin. To quote Van Boheemen again: "That the epigenetic plot presenting the relation of the individual to origin should have been so popular in the novel has to do with the valorization of the idea of origin in our culture. Origin is the key principle, the condition of meaning and signification. Once we know the origin of a person or a phenomenon, we know its meaning and identity. (...) In Western thought, origin – having and knowing the relation to the transcendent beginning – conveys essence, presence, and authority."<sup>3</sup>

Origin as a concept is of course not limited to family relations. Genealogical novels can also focus on other aspects of the past, like school, sexual awakening, region or village of birth, mother tongue etc., but in this article I only want to focus on the aspect of descent: on how one's identity is constructed through genealogy in the genre of the family novel.

*The Family Novel: a classic genre*

As a traditional, classic genre family novels were especially popular in 19th-century bourgeois society. Family novels were not only descriptive (describing the successive lives of generation after generation) but also prescriptive: they offered a guideline on how to live and how not to live a successful and prosperous life as a respected member of society and - not unimportant - thereby gathering wealth along your way. Moral, intellectual and material success seemed to go hand in hand. The story line was linear - either the decline of a family or the rise of one - and (gender) emancipation was not an issue. Women took care of the private sphere and men were active in the public area.

According to Patricia Drechsel Tobin in her book *Time and the Novel*, we “do not think of our lives as an indiscriminate jumble of disjointed events, but as a progress through action to knowledge; and at the end of a life, as at the culmination of a novel, we assume that existence has earned some glimpse of its meaning.”<sup>4</sup> The traditional novel, such as the classic family novel, confirms our common sense of life as purposeful and meaningful. The particular function of the family novel is described as follows by Tobin: “Within the extended family the individual member is guaranteed both identity and legitimacy through the tracing of the lineage back to the founding father, the family’s origin and first cause. (...) The same linear decorum pervades the structure of realistic narrative: all possibly random events and gratuitous details are brought into an alignment of relevance, so that at the point of conclusion all possibility has been converted into

necessity within a line of kinship - the subsequent having been referred to the prior, the end to the beginning, the progeny to the father.”<sup>5</sup> So the linear construction of the classic, realistic novel mirrors the theme of genealogy and causality. Form and content of the genre confirm each other, they are in perfect balance and carry the same norms and values.

Tobin sees the 19th century as the century of genealogy and patriarchy. Family then represents the principle of order, authority, social structure. A novel like Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* is generally considered as the classic example, the paradigm of the family novel.

Liisa Saariluoma, in an article on Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Years*, states that the “classic family novel is a bourgeois literary genre.” She also mentions Thomas Mann in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, John Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*. “The subject of a family novel,” she claims, “is a patriarchal family over several generations. The basis of this generic type of novel is the idea that belonging to a family provides its members with an identity and gives them a feeling that their life has a meaning.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Dutch Family novel in the 20th century*

In the Netherlands, Louis Couperus’ *De boeken der kleine zielen* is considered one of the finest examples of the genre in 19th- and early 20th-century Dutch literature, but the family novel is more often linked with minor literature, especially written by female authors, such as Jo van Ammers-

Küller, Willy Corsari and Ina Boudier-Bakker. The labelling of the family novel as a female genre in the first half of the twentieth century clearly shows its loss of prestige and its marginalization, as has been shown by researchers like Erica van Boven and Marianne Vogel.<sup>7</sup>

However, as I hope to show in this article, the genre seems to be more persistent and more flexible than that. In the second half of the twentieth century the genre seems to come back in a new form and content, able to incorporate a less traditional world view and more modern ideas. In the last three or four decades, in Flanders and the Netherlands, the term “family novel” has been reintroduced or at least revitalized. In my introduction I stated that the renewed interest in genealogy can be interpreted as a signal that people look for anchorage and certainties. Does the “new” family novel confirm this interpretation and offer such anchorage?

Especially in Flanders, so-called genealogical novels have gained wide popularity among writers and readers since about the 1970's. My research on this subject has shown that the genre is often perceived as being “typical” of Flemish literature, or even that the whole of Flemish literature is sometimes considered to be genealogical literature or “back-to-the-roots-literature.” As stated in the Flemish literary review *Yang* in 2001, the cliché has it that Flemish novels only deal with our mother and father” (dat Vlaamse boeken alleen maar gaan over ons vader en ons moeder).<sup>8</sup> Of course in reality the genre is only one of many trends in Flemish literature. Authors like Leo Pleysier, Monika van Paemel, Walter van den Broeck, Eric Vlamincx and Hugo Claus are some of the names that can

be mentioned as writers of contemporary family novels. Although less has been written about it in the Netherlands, the theme of family has also become prominent in Dutch literature, with authors like Adriaan van Dis, A.F.Th. Van der Heijden, Geert Mak, Jan Siebelink, Doeschka Meijsing and others.

In both Flanders and the Netherlands, contemporary family novels show at least one very important difference from the 19th century genre of the family novel: they are almost all autobiographical or autofictional. The autobiographical turn in our literature during the last decades has been commented on elsewhere, so I will not discuss it here.<sup>9</sup> The result for the genre of the family novel has been that there is most often a character narrator or a first person narrator, who tells his or her story from his position in the present and brings up memories of the past, reconstructs a piece of family history, often by using documents like photos, letters or family trees.

Authority and linearity are still important in contemporary family novels. Recent and highly appreciated novels like *De eeuw van de ekster* by the Flemish author Brigitte Raskin, *De eeuw van mijn vader* by Geert Mak or *Knielen op een bed violen* by Jan Siebelink still retain some of that chronological and teleological logic and are based on mimetic-realist poetics, the idea that the past can to some extent be reconstructed through narrative. These novels are in a way reassuring, especially because of their documentary character. The past seems to be something that can be reconstructed, grasped, kept and cherished. The present is the logical outcome of that past, and the narrator's

identity is explained through the reconstruction of his or her ancestors. Stories seem to be rather unproblematic vehicles for our memories, trustworthy family keepers.

Most contemporary family novels tend to focus less on age-long generations than on their 19th century precursors; they restrict their family history to grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, and of course the narrator's generation (brothers, sisters, cousins). That trend mirrors a social evolution in which the concept of family has been given a more narrow acceptance.

Yet some authors like Erik Vlamincx or Walter Van den Broeck still seem tributary to the more classic genre of the family novel, reconstructing their family tree further back, or writing a long cycle of novels suggesting the ideas of completion and coherence. In fact the range of what can be considered "family novels" has substantially widened. The genre has been "infected" with other genres and the socio-cultural circumstances have altered entirely.

If we still call the family novel a "genre" in the past decades, it is certainly not static or homogeneous. Dirk de Geest has shown that speaking of a genre creates a strategic, conventional and normative framework against which every text is read and evaluated.<sup>10</sup> A genre approach can sometimes be more harmful than helpful.

It seems more appropriate to use a dynamic genre-concept and to consider each new family novel as a comment on the genre, a shifting of its limits. In contrast to the 19th-century family novel, the contemporary family novel is marked by a relative openness. It might resemble a classic reconstruction of a family tree, and be a *Bildungsroman* or an

autobiography, a "father book" or a documentary novel... In what follows I will mention just a few of the narrative strategies that break open the genre and question the classic generic characteristics.

### *Authority*

Claire de Ribaupierre has shown that the family novel as a narrative monument is more problematic or ambiguous than it seems. Is the monument erected to remember the forefathers or to legitimize the self? In her book *Le roman généalogique*, focusing on the authors Claude Simon and Georges Perec, she writes: "L'identité se construit par projection: l'individu cherche par le détour de l'Autre à découvrir son image, à se voir. L'autre permet de donner naissance à une entité qui devient, dans le processus de l'identification, un Je. Ce Je peut alors être nommé et être connu. Dans nos récits généalogiques, le narrateur cherche des doubles (...) dans les membres de la famille."<sup>12</sup> She stresses the element of construction more than that of reconstruction: genealogical novels create a family, create roots (*fabriquer l'objet familial*). The narrator is not really looking for the other, but for the self. The other members of the family are made to function as mirrors to the self. The autobiographical genealogical novel often follows that scheme: the origin lies not in the past, but in the present, in the narrator, in the narration.

Such a view of the origin of the genealogy in the present also changes the locus of authority in the novel. The authority no longer lies in the father-concept, in the *a priori*, but in the *ad hoc* narrator, the here and now of the narration. A good example

of such a shift is the novel *De Vermaledijde Vaders* by Monika van Paemel (The Cursed Fathers), published in 1985.

That novel is considered a milestone in Flemish literature and has caused van Paemel to be canonized as an experimental, feminist writer. *De Vermaledijde Vaders* can be read as a fragmentary and furious autobiography. It offers a kaleidoscopic view of twentieth-century Flanders, intertwined with her own family history. She deals especially with father figures, in particular her own father, whom she considers to be an incarnation of the patriarchal principle which sets norms for the female characters and limits their identity. Van Paemel writes in an associative, fragmentary style which reflects her view that the world is incoherent, and not linear or purposeful as in a classic patriarchal view. Her writing installs her own norms and ideas, thus overwriting those of "the fathers." In her novel she tries to get even with the father-principle and pulls authority her way. Yet it can be argued that she does not entirely succeed in her intention, because she still uses the fathers as the background against which to emancipate and prove herself.

In many cases the shift of authority marks a change in the way the family and the family relations are described. Often the novel is not so much a tribute to the family as an attempt to settle the score with it, and especially with the father. The settlement is often not very successful and in the undermining of the father, there is often also some kind of confirmation of his authority, as for example in *Indische duinen* by Adriaan Van Dis (1994).

### *Focus on Form*

More remarkable than the evolution outlined above, however, is the new narrative form of many contemporary family novels. Whereas traditionally, as Saariluoma puts it, the family novel was not seen as a concept of form but as a concept referring to content, today the attention is shifted from content to narration. But then, when form becomes more important or significant, the content also changes. That is the case in Monika van Paemel's novel, where her experimental way of writing unties the family relations so that she writes herself free from the lineage. Many more examples can be given of this tendency in recent family novels to break the realist-mimetic code which seemed to be crucial for the genre, as we have seen in Tobin's book, thereby changing not only a mere formal literary convention but the entire content of the genre.

Many examples can be given of the very different ways in which recent family novels deconstruct their own story (its linearity, its realism) in order to expose the lack of foundations of the monument they seem to be constructing. The novel *Naar Merelbeke* (1994) by the Flemish author Stefan Hertmans is one of those novels that ingeniously builds and deconstructs the whole concept of the roots-novel. In an interesting essay on the novel, Bart Vervaeck calls it an anti-genealogical novel, which to me is still some form of genealogical novel, since it explicitly deals with genealogy and works with it. Vervaeck uses Deleuze's concept of the rhizome to clarify this.<sup>13</sup> A rhizome is a subterranean network of roots mainly characterized by its many entrances. The rhizome for Deleuze has its opposite in the tree and the root. He sees

the tree (in our case the family tree) and the root as sad examples of a western way of thinking that is focused on unity, centrism, hierarchy, organisation, causality, identity and representation. The alternative, the rhizome, is characterized by heterogeneity, arbitrariness, multiplicity, festering. There is no organizing memory and no principal genetic axis, in other words: there is no classic genealogy. That is why the rhizome is considered to be anti-genealogical.

In recent family novels the concepts of linearity and causality are often countered by multiplicity and parataxis. However, both kinds of narration are often present in the same novel. To give an example, a book may start to reconstruct the life of the father, or tries to find clues and causes in the past which can explain the identity of the narrator, but that narrative trail is interrupted by parts of the text that are enumerative or paratactic.

In the novel *Asbestemming* van A.F.Th. Van der Heijden, for example., the narrator is confronted with the death and the cremation of his father. The subtitle of the novel is "A requiem." The narrator tries to reconstruct his father's life and analyse the ways in which he does or does not resemble his father. For one thing, he traces his own drinking habit back to his great-grandfather and tells the reader about his childhood obsession with the hereditary taint of alcoholism. In other words, in the search for his own identity he uses his father as a mirror. One very remarkable chapter in the novel is called "Heijdeniana." The suffix "iana" typically indicates a disparate collection of anecdotes and trivialities, and the term "Heijden" here connects that collection to the family name (Van der

Heijden). In this heterogeneous and almost arbitrary collection of anecdotes, all chronology is lost. The memory of the narrator seems to be directed by a "random" button. Each piece of text in this chapter is a separate entry into the memory of the narrator and into the life of the father: a true rhizome.

A different example of parataxis and enumeration in a recent family novel is offered by the Flemish author Leo Pleysier. His books since *Wit is altijd schoon* (1989) can all be called family novels: dealing with his aunts, his sister, his brother, his mother and in *Volgend jaar in Berchem* (2000), mainly his father. In that novel, the narrator, his brothers and sisters and in-laws are gathered for a New Year's celebration. The novel is the representation of their conversation. Thematic parataxis can be seen in the way they all seem to hold their own monologue instead of communicating with each other. They bring up childhood memories about their parents, but everyone seems to have his or her own memories and interpretations. There is hardly any collective memory in this family. The narrator, who has a sore throat and can't participate in the conversation, does not bring the different voices together. The impossibility of a truthful reconstruction of the past circles around their different father-images. Each person seems to create his own father. Their father was clearly a very dominant and aggressive figure, who resists accurate representation. Even now, after his death, he dominates the family gatherings. An extreme example of parataxis can be seen in the following passage:

Hij was een lastige vader, zegt ons Hilde.  
Hij was een intense vader, zegt onze Robert.

Een astrante vader, zegt ons Hilde. Een trotse vader, zegt ons Greet.  
 Een duistere vader, zegt ons Annemie. Een avontuurlijke vader, zegt onze Robert.  
 Een gevaarlijke vader, zegt ons Annemie.  
 Een buitensporige vader, zegt onze Robert.  
 Een wilde vader, zegt ons Annemie. Een onstuimige vader, zegt onze Robert.  
 Een vergeetachtige vader, zegt ons Hilde.  
 Een nonchalante vader; zegt ons Greet.  
 Een rusteloze vader, zegt ons Hilde. Een levenslustige vader, zegt onze Robert.  
 Een opvliegende vader, zegt ons Annemie.  
 Een heftige vader, zegt ons Greet.  
 Een ongelikte vader, zegt ons Hilde. Een eigenzinnige vader, zegt ons Greet. Een buitengewone vader, zegt onze Robert.  
 Onze vader, zegt ons Greet.

The reconstruction of a coherent father-image cannot be accomplished.

In a way the whole of Pleysier's oeuvre can be seen as a constant reformulation of the same struggle with his family and the self-positioning he tries to accomplish in that filiation. Each novel is thus paratactic in relation to the others.

A third and last example (many others could be given) is the novel *Gesloten huis* (1994) by Nicolaas Matsier, subtitled: "Zelfportret met ouders." In that novel Matsier is vacating his parents' house shortly after the death of his mother. He brings up memories of his mother, father, and other family members. In doing so he is very conscious of the problematic functioning of any memory. He explicitly doubts his own memories. Yet he goes on to recollect anecdotes and scenes

from his youth. The whole novel is conceived as a more or less chaotic collection of anecdotes, parallel to the unorganised heap of objects he collects from his parents' house. He, his brother and his sister vacate the house in a non-systematic way, that is reflected in the narration: "Iemand haalde de verjaardagskalender weg (...) Iemand maakte de lectuurbak leeg (...) Iemand gaf de planten water (...) Iemand legde een rol plastic vuilniszakken op tafel neer" etc. He brings a lot of the objects to his own house, where they are useless and just lie around in disorder.

The climax of the narrator's fascination with details and inventory is his obsession with a special book he found in one of his parents' drawers. He calls it the Book of Spots (*Het Vlekkenboek*). That book is an alphabetic collection of cuttings that are all concerned with how to remove one specific type of spot: "Gelatine in muiskleurig tapijt. Aanslag in theepot. Ietwat geelgeworden ivoor. Omkrullende tapijten," etc. That book of spots seems to function as a mirror of the novel: it is the narrator's ideal book. The alphabetic ordering is only one way of reading it, as arbitrary as any other. His favourite way of reading is leafing through a book, an endless way of reading because you never finish it. "Bladeren, dat geeft glimpen te zien, doorkijkjes, *tranches de vie*, zo terloops, gedetailleerd, lukraak dat het soms de adem in je keel doet stokken." It is a rhizomatic approach to writing and reading. "Zo dwaal ik rond in het vlekken-schrift, volgens de willekeur van het alfabet, of bladerend in het wilde weg, om mij toegang te verschaffen tot deze wereld van verdwenen deugden en weetjes." The narrator considers it to be the most truthful and credible way of reconstruction, especially for the memory

of the past, because there is no fixed order, no one interpretation, it is dynamic and variable.

### Conclusion

I have given here three examples of family novels that use a realistic-mimetic narrative code next to, and interrupted by, an alternative form of narration: enumerative, parataxic, non-hierarchical. Such textual strategies (and others) disrupt the illusion of causality and mock the possibility of a linear reconstruction of the past. The arbitrariness of memory can be exposed by not using a classic narration; it seems to be more authentic to use other forms of representation and narration.

Does this kind of family novel offer the anchorage and answers that people seem to be looking for in the past? I doubt it. It shows rather that the past is forever lost to us. We may enter the rhizome by our own choice, but we never know where it will lead us or if we will ever come out of it again.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Knack, 22-03-06 : 28-36.

<sup>2</sup> Christine van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance. Language, Gender and Authority from Fielding to Joyce*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1987: 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Drechsel Tobin, *Time and the Novel. The Genealogical Imperative*, Princeton University Press, 1978: 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Liisa Saariluoma, "Virginia Woolf's *The Years* : Identity and Time in an Anti-Family Novel," *Orbis Litterarum* 54 (1999) : 276-300.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Marianne Vogel, *Baard boven baard*, Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2001, and Erica van Boven, *Een hoofdstuk apart. Vrouwenromans in de literaire kritiek 1898-1930*, Amsterdam: Sara, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> *Yang* 37 (2001), 4. Special issue: "Over de Vlaamse literatuur zoals zij was, is en ooit nog zal zijn."

<sup>9</sup> See for example Anne Marie Musschoot, "Het gekoesterde ego. Autobiografisch schrijven en het einde van het millennium," *Ons Erfdeel* 45 (2002): 62-73, and Frank Hellemans, "Van kleine tot grote geschiedenis. 30 jaar autobiografisch schrijven in Vlaanderen (1975-2005)," *Deus ex machina* 29 (2005), 3-6.

<sup>10</sup> Dirk de Geest, "Aantekeningen voor een functie-gerichte genretheorie. Literaire genres als prototypische categorieën," in Joris Vlasselaers and Hendrik van Gorp, eds. : *Vorm of norm, ALW-cahier*

Family Keepers : On the Contemporary Family Novel in Flanders and the Netherlands

nr. 8, Antwerp: UIA, 1989, 15-31.

<sup>11</sup> Claire de Ribaupierre, *Le roman généalogique*  
– *Claude Simon et Georges Perec*. Editions la part  
de l'oeil. 2002: 163.

<sup>12</sup> Bart Vervaeck, "Franse gasten in Merelbeke:  
Stefan Hertmans en het poststructuralisme." On:  
[www.dbnl.org](http://www.dbnl.org). 1999.

<sup>13</sup>Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizôme*. Les  
Editions de Minuit. 1976.