

MONIKA VAN PAEMEL (1945-)

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Monika van Paemel was born in 1945 in the village of Poesele in East Flanders. Very little is known about her private life except that she is married and has children. The first of her five novels so far was published in 1971.

In one sense it is hard to know any more about Monika van Paemel than the sparse facts noted above: it seems that she values her privacy. In another sense she reveals herself totally, since her novels relentlessly explore and re-explore her early years, and there is plenty of material in them to be evoked, a great source of anger to be released. To quote her husband's summary of her childhood:

Her parents never had much influence on her. A mother who rejected her even before birth—that is of course a fundamental trauma. A birth which dragged on for three days. A doctor who was criminally incompetent. A forceps was improvised on the spot. The newborn baby was put aside with a bleeding head wound, they thought nothing could be done about it anyway. An aunt who had herself just lost a baby, took pity on her and she stayed with this aunt's family for the first few years of her life. . . . And then she was taken away from the aunt by her grandmother, the head of the clan. Jaundice, stayed in bed for months. Then a brain disease, years in hospital, years of convalescence, and finally she was sent away to boarding school. That was when I got to know her, when she was about 14.¹

Such an upbringing is mercifully untypical, but Monika van Paemel is typical of writers in that she makes very personal revelations in fiction but keenly desires to avoid indiscreet inquiry into her factual self. When her first novel, *Amazone met het blauwe voorhoofd*, won the *Vlaamse boekenbeurs* for the best first novel of 1972, she was not entirely happy. To write, she says in her interview with Carlos Alleene, reprinted in his collection of such interviews called *Schrijvers zijn ook mensen*, requires a long apprenticeship, quiet and solitude, and one cannot have these things

while one is in the limelight: "het toekennen van prijzen [is] op zichzelf misschien niet gezond" (155).

This, indeed, is the opening theme of the interview. Alleene then turns the conversation to the belief that an author has authority, a view with which van Paemel agrees. Thanks to her books and the radio programme for women that she hosted for two years, women consult her: "Zo krijg ik geregeld brieven van vrouwen die vaak hun intiemste gevoelens prijsgeven" (157). These activities have kept her in touch with women's thinking, she says, something she needs in order to be a writer.

Is Monika van Paemel a feminist? She certainly would seem to be when she claims that women writers have to create their own language, for example to describe their erotic feelings, because men have never allowed them to do this and therefore the language has never developed the words women needed. But she says she is not militant; it is just that women must declare their position and thus refuse to be dominated again. To this end, the whole concept of love needs rethinking; as it is, one partner is supposed to sacrifice her personality, independence and talent, as if love were a full-time occupation. Raising children, of course, is almost that, at least in the present social structure, and van Paemel has difficulty reconciling her need to write with her choice of marriage and children.

The interview then discusses the form of her works. She says she has never written a linear narrative because in this century one cannot:

We weten te veel. Ons leven wordt voortdurend door allerlei informatie

doorkruist. We krijgen stukken informatie over van alles en nog wat, maar een totaalbeeld ontbreekt (157).

In everyday life, however, we are barely conscious of all this information, and it is the author's job to make us aware: "Het is aan de auteur de taal op een dusdanige manier te hanteren dat ze een bewustzijn creëert" (157).

As for the aspect of personal revelation, she rightly points out that the character is not the author, but her mask:

Hoe je het draait of keert, literatuur is de werkelijkheid laten zien met een masker op. Achter dat masker kun je jezelf blijven en je toch tonen (166).

Her first novel, *Amazone met het blauwe voorhoofd* (1971), demonstrates the truth of her remarks. In the matter of personal revelation, for instance, it is impossible to work out the full story of the narrator's life from what she tells us. Van Paemel's bloody birth is there, in the narration, and a happy early childhood on a farm, and teenage years spent in a convent school, and between whiles visits to her parents and others. About the only reference to the years of illness, however, is mention of her white hair. The narrator, like van Paemel, has two children, but there is no word of a husband, so who is the father? The *jij* for whom she (the narrator) is writing the book? From the first page onwards *jij* is a German boy called Dietrich with whom, as a teenager, she has her first radiant sexual experience, but is he the addressee throughout? She has two girls; if they are both by him, they must be twins, or else he visits her in the summers. Are there other men? The author herself is well hidden.

She is frank enough, however, in her descriptions of sex and of longing for it. The narrator's hips push against the man, she is naked and open under him, where she opens and closes. Ordinary language seems well able to describe these reactions, unless indeed the recurrence of these

descriptions also reflects a perpetual struggle to push through to new and more accurate language. I was struck only by the image of her being "uit de roeiriemen," the straps in which rowers put their feet, a fine image, evoking being both sprawled on one's back and out of control. There is marvellous imagery throughout this novel, but it more often illuminates topics other than sex; striking, often dense, it is sometimes unclear. But then, we are specifically warned not to want to **understand** the book, presumably because that is a means of domination and the author would like us to listen to her as to an equal, indeed, to co-create the work, which implies equality.

The same concern not to merely spread herself out before us like a map perhaps explains the other point made in the interview, a point which also concerns a feature of *Amazone*, namely the non-linear narration. The narrator's life is glimpsed at its different stages, in tableaux which alternate with reflections made from her standpoint in the present. Rather than a back and forth, we have here a circular movement. The book's time structure is not so much a childhood and youth as a cycle of seasons, spring to winter. Love, awaited, satisfied and then remembered with longing, is the same cycle, as the final words of the book tell us: "Morgen, middag, avond. Ogen, mond, heimwee, verlangen, liefde. Lente, zomer, herfst, winter" (107). Or earlier in the book: "Lente ontmoeting, zomer vereniging, herfst verlangen" (58). And winter, it seems, dull hopeless waiting.

The opening page presents elements of this cycle in an extremely condensed form. It begins with a general reflection: the place of her childhood has changed, and she has only old letters to help her recall that childhood; for we think we can remember, but can we? And the memories, with that cautionary word as to their value, flood forth: her uncle's horse defecating as it pulls her along in the cart; feeling her breasts grow; and her desire for Dietrich the

moment she set eyes on him.

One of the epigraphs to the novel speaks of going mad of too much joy and grief at once. The joy here seems to be mainly in the past, the grief now. If she lives on, she says a few pages later, it is out of lifelong cowardice. She lives in permanent fear and writes to exorcize it. And also to correspond with the man she loves, Dietrich let us say, though he need not answer. Just as the reader cannot, of course. The reader is implied in the book, which is thus faintly self-referential.

The narrator also knows about intertextuality. All books are whores, she says; they get you pregnant with one of your own that otherwise would have remained a mere possibility. But she adds what perhaps one needs a creator's experience to say: even once born, the book is still only a possibility, you have to bring it up like a child, for the rest of your days. Nay more, all the little stories that go to make up your total story, tell you; the work creates the supposed creator. As she, perhaps, has created the lover: "En meer en meer verword jij tot een verhaal dat ik verzin (dat ik verzonnen heb)." To hope for the impossible, as she is doing, is to create fiction. But then it is necessary to do so in order to survive: "Zonder een flinke dosis zelfbegoocheling zou dit leven niet houdbaar zijn" (73).

Yet her revolt is against deception, that practised by the male-dominated world. For this revolt she has role models, and chief among them is the bird of the title. He is known in English as a blue-fronted parrot; he is mostly green and has congeners with yellow or red foreheads instead of blue. The author chooses blue, I assume, for its romantic symbolism: her narrator carries an ideal in her head, namely freedom. But "de vrijheid dwingt geen respect af in het huis van burgers"(81). Men rule such houses, and the parrot hates men and curses them volubly: "hoevelen heb je begroet met zachtgevooste

kooswoordjes als lelijkaard, smeerlap, zwarte en kletskep (meestal tegen pastoors)" (79).

Which being so, it is interesting that the narrator insists on the parrot's masculinity. Her own sensuality needs a male, but as for living with one, it seems that only parrots and tomcats are tolerable. Perhaps the identification goes further. She constantly objects to being treated as a "troeteldiertje." As a child she is asked why she plays boys' games. Because I'm a girl, she says. To be a woman and wish to be free, apparently, is to be a man in a woman's body. Whether this is so or not, the parrot is a role model: he resists loss of freedom till he dies for it. Not that he can escape his cage, but he never stops striving to be himself. The alternative for the narrator is never to evolve, to turn to stone. Such a state is convenient for those around her, for it lets them feel they can protect her—and in all of us is the desire to protect and to be protected; but freedom is freedom from that desire. Even her endless longing to be reunited with Dietrich, even lovemaking, although it requires freedom from family and bourgeoisie, is not perfect freedom, for the lover is another person, and others see only their representation of you.

The very density and complexity of *Amazone* is a clear sign that its topics, and Monika van Paemel's need to write, are far from exhausted. Thus her subsequent novels develop the same themes further. *De confrontatie* (1974) contrasts a woman who demands the right to express her sensuality and her friend who accepts life with its restrictions on that right. A woman's search to understand her dominating and disconcerting grandmother is the theme of *Marguerite* (1976). *De vermaledijde vaders* (1985) explores at length (422 pages) the relationships between the narrator and her family, and within it; but also the outside world, hitherto relegated to the background, now assumes the importance one might expect in a novel of epic length, and we learn about the

aftermath in Flanders of the Second World War.

This exterior subject, however, is dealt with in the same circling, interwoven structure used in the previous novels. In her interview with Carlos Alleene, the author rejects "militair-lineaire structuur" and calls her novel "een opstapeling van verhalen" (165). And indeed, its four parts seem disconnected, but one sees how they fit together. The first part is about the war and the effect on the narrator of her father's experiences; he had collaborated with the Nazis, and paid for it. The second part is about two women friends, very different from each other but both victims of male-ruled society, and the lesson young Pamela (such is the narrator's name) learns from the experience, namely the need to fight hard for freedom. The third part deals with her adolescent revolt, which is but the first phase of a lifelong revolt. And in the fourth part we return to the war, the dominant father, and the channelling of Pamela's frustration into writing.

Within each part, moreover, we see the

same juxtaposition of not immediately related themes that one encounters in *Amazone*. The extract published in *Septentrion* in 1979 (s. van Aken) shows us the narrator as a small child suddenly tearing the bedding off her parents' bed, turns without warning to the family's political discussions, then to the importance in the family's eyes of its name, then to the other war: men vs. women, back to the bedroom and the narrator trying in vain to swat a fly, and lastly to the narrator's preference for pets rather than dolls and simple-minded children's games.

This is what I have read, or read about, of Monika van Paemel's work. I have not yet seen her latest publication, a novella called *De eerste steen* (1988). She has also published poems and essays, and is now the first woman on the editorial board of *De Gids*. She is an exciting writer with important things to say, who makes the reader use his brains for once. (I refuse to put "his or her brains" in that sentence.) It is worthwhile to stock up on her works for the winter evenings ahead.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Writing in Holland and Flanders* 40 (Autumn 1982): 33. This was the publication (suspended in 1982) of the "Stichting tot bevordering van de vertaling van Nederlands letterkundig werk," containing translated excerpts from recent Dutch-language literary works, about which English-language publishers were invited to inquire (cf. H. Joldersma, rev. of *Writing in Holland and Flanders*, in *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 10,2 (Fall 1989): 30-31.

Works by Monika van Paemel

Amazone met het blauwe voorhoofd. Brussels: Elsevier, 1971.

De confrontatie. Den Haag: Nijgh en van Ditmar, 1974.

Marguerite. Den Haag: Nijgh en van Ditmar, 1976.

De vermaledijde vaders. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1985.

De eerste steen. Antwerpen: Vereniging ter bevordering van het Vlaamse boekwezen; Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1988.

Translated into French:

Les Pères maudits. Arles: Actes sud, 1989.

Secondary Literature

Aken, Paul van. "Une fille de Calliope: Monika van Paemel." *Septentrion* 2 (1989): 3-5. An extract from *De vermaledijde vaders*, with the French translation alongside, follows (6-10).

Alleene, Carlos. "Monika van Paemel." *Schrijvers zijn ook mensen*. Amsterdam: Manteau, 1987. 155-167.