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**Maarten 't Hart's *De kroongetuige*:**  
**Murder mystery, or something completely different?**

Published in 1983, Maarten 't Hart's *De kroongetuige* is at first glance a skillfully-structured murder mystery. The book met with mixed reviews<sup>1</sup> but also with major popular success. It has continued to sell steadily since then, receiving its 28th printing in May 2001.

Maarten 't Hart (b. 1944) is almost completely unknown in the English-speaking world. In the Netherlands, however, he is a major literary presence, and in recent years he has found a large and growing audience in Germany. Still, a survey of Websites indicates that among reviewers, critics, and readers, he has detractors as well as admirers. One such review available on Google, first published by Ad But in the *Winschoter Courant*, has to a considerable extent prompted this paper. The reviewer argues that 't Hart has spun a good mystery story but that he has used (or abused) the form of the thriller to write something else altogether:

And yet *De kroongetuige* is a book with something fishy about it. It's an article in the wrong packaging. The form is that of a detective novel, but part of the content

isn't. 't Hart has woven into his story - which is not at all spectacular - a few secondary threads, and so the wrong content has gotten into the packaging he used. But that wouldn't be so bad if these sideways leaps weren't essential. But 't Hart's ideas, which are what make him the writer he is, are precisely in the bits that don't belong, like currants in the mayonnaise. And since there aren't supposed to be currants in it, we are left with a rather slithery substance: a unity without shape, or taking the shape of whatever falls into it. That's how *De kroongetuige* is: a skeleton of images clothed in a treacly story. And yet it's tasty.<sup>2</sup>

This view of the novel as a sticky though not unpalatable mess, a murder mystery that isn't one, seemed puzzling. Is there a convention, unknown to many mystery writers (such as Reginald Hill), that a murder mystery cannot contain ideas? Beyond that: is *De kroongetuige*, in its essence or even in what it seems to promise, a murder mystery at all, or is it something quite different?

The book's structure and plot are as follows. Part One is written from the point of view of Thomas Kuyper, a *wetenschappelijke hoofdmedewerker* (roughly: associate professor) of pharmacology in an unidentified university and city. Part Two consists of a brief exchange of letters between Kuyper, who is being detained on suspicion of murder, and his wife Leonie. Part Three consists of Leonie's diary, begun as she seeks to determine what happened during the week when she was away from home, and continued in the aftermath of her discovery of what she believes to be proof of her husband's guilt. Part Four is the account of her husband's trial. Part Five takes place the day of her husband's release for lack of evidence, and offers a *dénouement* of sorts. The central character is Leonie, and the device of the letters permits the shift of voice from him to her.

Now the plot. In his wife's absence Thomas Kuyper, a shy, introverted, socially inept man in his mid-thirties to mid-forties, spends a good deal of time with Jenny Fortuyn, an attractive, vivacious library assistant in her early twenties with whom he has fallen head over heels in love. He becomes the last person known to have been in her company on the night of August 1, when she goes missing. The investigating police officer, Joost Lambert, becomes convinced that Thomas killed Jenny, presumably because she had rejected his advances, and disposed of the corpse by feeding it to the two hundred starving rats that form part of his current experiment, an attempt to discover a drug that will turn rats into cannibals. The case against Thomas is essentially non-existent until a witness is found who states that he saw Thomas

entering his laboratory with a woman around 3:30 in the morning and saw him leaving alone two hours later. Then Jenny's clothes are found, hidden in a washroom in the lab building. As well, it is discovered that a valuable cache of mind-altering drugs, kept in a small room to which only Thomas and the professor of pharmacology have keys, has disappeared. Since the professor was out of town from the summer to the late autumn, and since Jenny is known to have been on the fringes of the drug scene, a further possible motive for her presumed death is that Thomas stole the drugs for Jenny and then killed her to prevent her blackmailing him.

Central to the exchange of letters is Thomas's attempt to explain to his wife, a homemaker in her early to mid-thirties, how and why he fell in love with Jenny. His account is selective, though, as we already know his earlier account of the night of Jenny's disappearance to be. In any event, because he refuses to cooperate with the police and the investigating magistrate, he is soon deprived of his letter-writing privileges.

At this point Leonie becomes the narrator, as she sets out to discover what happened and to try to establish that Jenny is still alive. Leonie's diary reveals her to be intelligent and an excellent observer, given to contemplating clouds and listening to the music of Robert Schumann. She is also conventional, risk averse, and given to bouts of jealousy. Her diary account of her investigations makes clear that the answer to one question interests her at least as much as the matter of Jenny's disappearance: did Thomas sleep with Jenny? This is linked to the central concern and sadness of Leonie's

life: her infertility. It is not just Thomas's possible infidelity that troubles her but the thought that he might have impregnated another woman. There is no doubt about Jenny's fertility: Leonie learns early, from Thomas in fact, that her younger rival has already had two abortions! As Leonie finds out more about Jenny, her attitude to the younger woman is one of growing envy, resentment, distaste and hatred, as well as paradoxically something like grudging admiration, for Jenny seems to have been spectacularly successful in attracting men as well as at least one woman.

One key fact is that, although Leonie has seen Jenny in passing, presumably in the public library, she never knew her. This explains why, when in mid-September she finds a woman's body in the rarely-visited museum of zoology attached to the lab building where Thomas works, she assumes that it is Jenny's. Furthermore, the chain of reasoning that leads her to the corpse points to Thomas as the person who hid it there, in a large alcohol-filled jar that also contains the bodies of two manatees or sea cows.

Her shattering discovery all but immobilizes Leonie. She did not believe Thomas to be capable of murder, the more so because he is an unconvincing liar. Now she has to cope with two disturbing facts: that her husband is a murderer, and that he was able to deceive her. Yet she continues to love him, and she does not want to be the agent of his conviction for the crime he has committed. She ends up doing nothing. Very largely isolating herself from other human beings, she waits for her husband's trial to begin.

Leonie's account of the trial is fascinating.

Wondrous to read for someone accustomed to North American murder trials, the trial is concluded in a day, with judgement to be rendered in two weeks. What that judgment will be is fairly clear, since the chief witness for the prosecution, the *kroongetuige*, has testified that he saw Thomas leave the building, heard him get into a car, then saw him drive away - yet during the cross-examination, Thomas's lawyer reveals that his client does not own a car and does not even have a driver's license! (This points to sloppy police work, but a contributing factor is Thomas's refusal to say anything once he has been arrested.) The chapter also helps to explain the novel's title: hearing the man who puts Thomas at the scene of the presumed crime described as *de kroongetuige*, Leonie notes that *she* is the real chief witness. But *she* is not saying anything.

The final chapter begins when Thomas, found not guilty and released early so he may be home for Christmas, is confronted with Leonie's claim that she knows where he hid Jenny's body. He denies all knowledge of this; they go to the museum to settle the issue. This leads to a startling development: there is a body all right, but it isn't Jenny's!

It is Leonie who then surmises whose body it is and Leonie who comes up with a plausible explanation of what really happened on the night of August 1st. Is she right? Lambert is willing to accept it as a working hypothesis, and he concedes that in any event Thomas cannot have been the murderer, but he does not believe Thomas has told the whole story and he shares his scepticism with Leonie. Her response is ambivalent: she recognizes that there are

loose ends in her account of what happened, but she is committed to life with the man she still loves, a commitment reinforced when she learns that he never slept with Jenny. Her explanation may be fiction at least in part, but it is a fiction that allows her to get on with life. Besides, she believes that Lambert wished to create doubt in her mind about Thomas's actions because the policeman is attracted to her, a surmise more than borne out by the comments he has made about both her and Jenny.

The reader, too, has doubts about Thomas's involvement, and his account of why he withheld crucial evidence that would have aided his defense is not fully convincing. If he had told Lambert in August what he tells Leonie in December, there would almost certainly have been no trial. (The same thing can be said about Leonie's silence, of course.) At the end of the book we see Thomas and Leonie together, listening to Schumann with the possibility of a test-tube baby serving as an approach to a happy ending. As to what happened on the night of August 1st, we sense Leonie's explanation to be at least partly true, but we can't ultimately know everything.

This refusal to tie the loose ends together is inherent in 't Hart's use of first-person narration. It may be found, too, in his novel *Het woeden der gehele wereld* (1993), which was also wrongly identified as a mystery and in 1994 even won *De gouden strop*, the annual award for the best thriller published in the Netherlands. At the end of that book we do not know who really killed the policeman whose murder has obsessed the protagonist for more than thirty years, nor do we have clear answers to other important

questions. 't Hart's characters and readers have to live with uncertainty, the awareness that many things can only be half known or cannot be known at all.

It is clear by now why aficionados of murder mysteries might consider 't Hart's foray into the genre to be flawed. My own assessment is that, though the issue of Jenny's disappearance is a crucial plot development, it is not what the book is about at all. The disappearance catches our attention, of course, because of the gruesome suggestion that Thomas has fed Jenny to his hungry rats. In due time we learn that this did not happen – though it remains unclear how the rats came to be sated on the morning of August 1st – but the device of suspending a corpse in alcohol with two sea cows is scarcely less gruesome, and so our fascination continues. However, some readers will have realized from an early stage that this book is not really a thriller at all. It describes the grief of involuntary childlessness, but above all it is about love: love frustrated, rejected, denied, and twisted into bitterness and hatred; love lost and love found.

Some of the love is for music, as something that helps to reconcile human beings to the disappointments of life. Having been rejected by Jenny, Thomas listens over and over again to Verdi's *Otello*, especially certain passages that offer him some solace in his pain: Iago's advice to Cassio: *Non ti cruciar*; Desdemona's line *Dammi la dolce e lieta parola del perdono* (give me the sweet and joyful word of forgiveness); and, most appositely, Cassio's third-act account of his flirtation with some girl (which, overheard by Otello, feeds the Moor's eventually murderous jealousy).

Leonie, on the other hand, is passionately devoted to Robert Schumann's music, towards which Thomas is rather negative. Yet when he arrives home unannounced, the present he brings for Leonie is a Schumann work, the violin concerto, that he is reasonably confident she has never heard. Walking home with her husband later that same day, Leonie, who is deeply unhappy because nothing seems to have changed in spite of everything that has happened that day and during the preceding months, thinks: "The only thing I had gained was that I had learned to understand the end of Schumann's life better." (207)<sup>3</sup> Her thoughts then turn to her inability to have children, an inability she feels with particular force at Christmas time: "That holiday that seemed invented especially to torment those who longed with all their mind and all their strength for a birth that would never come." (208)<sup>4</sup>

And yet she finds consolation in humming *Mondnacht*, a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff set to music by Schumann as part of his *Liederkreis*, Opus 39.

Some of the love is for children and animals. In one of the book's more touching passages, Leonie is questioning an old woman, who mistakes her for a classmate of her long-dead son. When the old woman learns that Leonie has no children, she asks her to look after her black lory and three of her cats after she dies, and against her better judgement Leonie agrees.

"Thank you, oh my child, I can see I touched you on a sore point, would you have liked to have children? Well, perhaps it's hard when the Lord doesn't

give them to you, but it's much harder, a hundred thousand times harder, when the Lord gives you just one child, one son, and then takes him away again, I can't understand how he could have done that to me, He himself knows what it's like when your son dies. Just be thankful He doesn't give you one. This isn't a world to bring children into, none of it makes sense any more." (111)<sup>5</sup>

Leonie ponders this, but it does not diminish her desire to have a child of her own.

At the core of this novel is sexual love, seen as both creative and destructive. And although Leonie is the book's central character, it is Jenny who catches our fancy, as she does that of Thomas, and Lambert (once her lover and then rejected), and Arianne, Jenny's lesbian attic-mate (*zoldergenootje*), whose love for Jenny has gone unrequited, and Robert, the rather shadowy lawyer with whom, we eventually learn, she has run away, and a host of nameless and faceless others. More than once Leonie asks herself and others: what did she have? She gets an answer of sorts during the trial, when Lambert is testifying:

I can tell you she has something, or maybe I should say she did have, with which she cast a spell over men. I don't understand that much about such things, but maybe you happened to see that movie with Brigitte Bardot in the title role ... wasn't it *En cas de malheur*, or was that just the title of the book the film was based on, *enfin* ... she was a girl like that, and when a girl like that rejects him, after first driving him crazy for her ... when a girl like that turns a man down, he could do anything." (156)<sup>6</sup>

The reference is apt. Based on a novel by Georges Simenon and superbly directed by Claude Autant-Lara, the film, released in 1958, features fine performances by Bardot as a delinquent young woman charged with robbery, and Jean Gabin as the lawyer who takes on her defense after she offers her body in payment, and who then loses his head over her. Lambert's reference to the movie has two functions: firstly it indicates the power of Jenny's animal magnetism, and secondly it offers a clue as to where she has gone.

For his part, Thomas, trying to figure out why he has fallen for Jenny, muses:

"If childlessness hadn't come between us, would I ever have wanted another woman?" But I know that that had something to do with it, but not much, and that I had fallen in love with Jenny for other, darker reasons. The first time I saw her in the library, I stared in fascination at her black bird claws, amazed that one such detail could cause so much excitement bordering on abhorrence. Later, when I'd gotten to know her, I was just as fascinated by her capriciousness and irritability which contrasted so strongly with, as Nietzsche put it, "such a mild and at bottom cheerful soul ... not marked by a grumbling tone or envy or bitterness." (20)<sup>7</sup>

Conscious of Jenny's shortcomings and moral defects, Thomas is nevertheless drawn by her appearance, her carefreeness, her capriciousness, her evident joie de vivre. Himself more than a bit unworldly, given to quoting Nietzsche (to the irritation of his

wife), he is bowled over both by Jenny's beauty and her effervescent worldliness. There is a sense that Jenny, who is said by both Arianne and Lambert to somewhat resemble Leonie, appears to him as a more exciting version of his wife.

Like the character played by Brigitte Bardot, Jenny is emphatically not "nice." But then, if nice guys finish last, as Leo Durocher proverbially said, it may be that nice women do too. And Leonie is no doubt nice in the sense of respectable, but not entirely in the sense of pleasant, though Thomas (far from the most perceptive of human beings) may think so. Her tongue is sharp and her intelligence is touched by malice. Her description of and reaction to the members of the women's centre, which she visits in the hope of getting more insight into Jenny, are anything but charitable. Accounts by other women about the misery of post-natal depression elicit no sympathy from Leonie, only this comment: "I wish I'd had a post-natal depression too" (Ik wou dat ik ook een post-natale depressie had gehad.) (116-7) Like many of us, she is prone to the delusion that her misfortunes outrank those of other people.

A more amusing insight into Leonie's streak of malice is offered by the tactic she chooses to combat the slide-shows put on by Thomas's boss, the chair of pharmacology, and his wife.

Once Thomas said, "How shall we ever get rid of them?" and I replied, "We'll ask them here and then we'll show them slides." And we did, and I showed them slides, and they wore themselves out trying to guess which city I must have taken them in. Nuremberg, Berne,

Berlin, Edinburgh, Funchal, Palma de Mallorca, oh, the names of all the world's capitals were heard, and they kept ... saying, "What beautiful photos, Leonie," and after the last one they asked, "Well, where was it?" and I answered, "Here." "What do you mean, here?" they said, and I answered: "I took all these slides right here in this town. Don't you think that absolutely priceless?" But they didn't think it was priceless at all, they left right after that and saying hardly another word. "I don't know how you dared," Thomas said. "Oh," I said, "people are blind, and people who travel a lot just plain have shit in their eyes, they really can't see a thing. If they could see anything they wouldn't feel the need to travel so darned much." (162)<sup>8</sup>

In the novel's closing pages Leonie is faced with a choice between two men. Lambert, whom she is beginning to find attractive, makes a fairly straightforward pass at her. Having suggested that Thomas is hiding the truth from both of them, he says:

"*Enfin*, I hear your husband coming home, let's leave it at that, we'll go on the assumption you've reconstructed the facts of the case correctly, perhaps that will give me a bit of credit with you, and in any case it's better for your peace of mind. But if, just as a possibility, he goes and joins Jenny, with the money from those drugs that he's deposited somewhere in the sort of bank that asks no questions, I hope I can come and knock on your door again."

"No," I said.

"All right," he said, "I already said you can lie." (204-5)<sup>9</sup>

He is referring to the fact that, as they both know, Thomas does *not* lie well.

Leonie chooses the man she chose twelve years earlier – we have been told that she made the advances, not he – because she still loves him, because he represents familiarity, because she feels safe with him. She is inordinately touched by his giving her a newspaper clipping about test-tube babies – she had missed reading it because she had stopped reading newspapers after discovering the body – and she is jubilant, to herself inexplicably so, because he had been only halfway unfaithful to her, because he did not sleep with Jenny. The novel's final paragraph, in which Leonie calls on her long dormant Calvinism, foreshadows renewal of her humanity and hope:

I cautiously folded my hands while stealing a glance at Thomas, who was busy reading his mail. I didn't want him to see me do what I hadn't done in a long time. He would surely make fun of me, since he had absolutely never had anything to do with any form of religion. ... When he had taken another long letter out of an envelope, I quickly closed my eyes and quickly prayed in my thoughts: "Merciful God, may hope make my empty cold spirit fruitful again." (212)<sup>10</sup>

This is not much of an ending to a murder mystery. And that mystery remains in any case unresolved. Leonie's account of how it happened is plausible but essentially unprovable. As well, the alleged perpetrators of a murder of which we become aware almost at the end of the novel are said to be living in Argentina, quite possibly beyond

the reach of Dutch law. But then, as I have tried to argue, *De kroongetuige* is only incidentally a murder mystery. It is really something completely different, a novel about love, lust, betrayal, despair, and renewal, in which the suspicion that a capital crime has been committed is little more than a device to aid the delineation of character and the portrayal of human relationships.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ad But, “t Hart schrijft, maar blijft-ie?” <http://www.gironet.nl/home/blyswyk/lees/dossier/kroongetuige%20recensies.htm>

<sup>2</sup> “En toch is *De kroongetuige* een boek met een luchtje. Het is het luchtje van een verkeerd verpakt artikel. De vorm is die van een detective, de inhoud deels niet. ’t Hart heeft in het – overigens beslist niet opzienbarende – verhaal een aantal bijlijnen geweven, waardoor een oneigenlijke inhoud in de gebruikte verpakking is terecht gekomen. Nu zou dat nog niet zo’n bezwaar zijn als die zijsprongen niet essentieel waren. Maar de ideeën van ’t Hart, die de essentie van zijn schrijverschap inhouden, bevinden zich juist in die oneigenlijke stukken: als krenten in de mayonaise. En aangezien daarin geen krenten horen, blijft bij uitgeven een wat glibberige substantie over: eenheid zonder vorm, zich schikkend naar wat het invalt. Zo zit *De kroongetuige* in elkaar: een skelet van denkbeelden omvleesd met een stroperig verhaal. En toch smakelijk.”

<sup>3</sup> “De enige winst die ik had geboekt was dat ik Schumanns levenseinde beter had leren begrijpen.”

<sup>4</sup> “Dat feest dat speciaal uitgevonden leek

om mensen te kwellen die met heel hun verstand en al hun kracht naar een geboorte verlangden die nooit komen zou.”

<sup>5</sup> “Dank je wel, ach kind, nou zie ik toch aan je dat ik een teer punt heb geraakt, had je dan zou graag kinderen willen hebben? Ja, misschien is ’t erg als de Here ze je niet geeft, maar ’t is nog veel erger, honderdduizend keer erger als de Here je één kindje geeft, één zoontje, en het dan weer van je afneemt, ik kan niet begrijpen hoe Hij me dat heeft kunnen aandoen, Hij weet toch zelf wat het is als je zoon sterft. Wees maar blij als Hij ze je niet geeft. Dit is toch geen wereld om kinderen in te krijgen, d’r klopt toch helemaal niets meer van.”

<sup>6</sup> “... Ik kan u zeggen dat ze iets heeft, of had, moet ik misschien zeggen, waardoor ze mannen betoverde. Ik heb niet zoveel verstand van die zaken, maar misschien hebt u toevallig die film gezien met Brigitte Bardot in de hoofdrol, ... was het niet *En cas de malheur*, of heette alleen het boek zo waarop die film was gebaseerd, enfin ... zo’n meisje was het en als zo’n meisje een man afwijst, na hem eerst het hoofd op hol ... als zo’n meisje een man de bons geeft, is hij tot alles in staat.”

<sup>7</sup> “Als die kinderloosheid niet tussen ons gekomen was, zou ik dan ooit naar een ander verlangd hebben?” Maar ik wist dat dat er wel iets, maar niet zoveel toe deed, en dat ik om andere, en duisterder redenen op Jenny verliefd was geworden. Toen ik haar voor de eerste keer in de bibliotheek zag, had ik gefascineerd naar haar zwarte vogelklauwen gestaard, stomverbaasd over het feit dat één zo’n detail zoveel aan afschuw grenzende opwindung kon veroorzaken. Later, toen ik haar had leren kennen, was ik al even

gefascineerd door haar grilligheid en prikkelbaarheid die zo sterk contrasteerde met de, naar het woord van Nietzsche, "degelijke, milde en in de grond blijmoedige ziel" van Leonie die "niet door een brommerige toon, nijd en verbittering gekenmerkt werd."

<sup>8</sup> Eens had Thomas gezegd: "Hoe komen we er ooit van af?" en ik had geantwoord: "We vragen ze terug en dan laten wij dia's zien," en dat deden we, en ik toonde hen dia's, en ze hadden zich uitgesloofd om te raden in welk stadje ik die gemaakt moest hebben. Neurenberg, Bern, Berlijn, Edinburgh, Funchal, Palma de Mallorca, o, de namen van alle hoofdsteden weerklonken en steeds hadden zij ... gezegd: "Wat heb je dat prachtig gefotografeerd, Leonie," en na de laatste dia hadden ze gevraagd: "Nou, waar was het," en ik had gezegd: "Hier." "Wat hier?" hadden zij gezegd and ik had geantwoord: "Ik heb alle dia's hier ter plaatse gemaakt. Vind je dat niet reuze grappig?" Maar ze hadden het niet grappig gevonden, ze waren daarna vrij snel en haast zonder groeten verdwenen. "Dat je dat hebt aangedurfd," had Thomas gezegd. "Ach," had ik gezegd, "mensen zien niks, en mensen die veel op reis gaan, hebben doodgewoon stront in hun ogen, die zien

helemaal niks. Als ze wel iets zagen zouden ze niet zo dringend op reis hoeven ..."

<sup>9</sup> "Enfin, ik hoor je man aankomen, laat nu maar verder rusten, we doen weer alsof jij de juiste toedracht hebt gereconstrueerd, misschien levert mij dat toch nog wat krediet bij jou, en in ieder geval is het beter voor je gemoedsrust. Maar als hij zich, om maar eens wat te noemen, met het geld van die drugs die hij nu ergens op een weinig bonafide bank heeft gezet, bij Jenny zal voegen, hoop ik dat ik nog eens bij je mag aankloppen."

"Nee," zei ik.

"Goed," zei hij, "ik zei toch al dat jij wel kunt liegen."

<sup>10</sup> Voorzichtig vouwde ik mijn handen, ondertussen tersluiks naar Thomas kijkend die not in zijn post verdiept was. Hij mocht niet zien wat ik heel lang niet meer gedaan had. Hij zou er mij vast en zeker om uitlachen, hij die van huis uit nooit iets met enige vorm van religie te maken had gehad ... Toen hij weer een lange brief uit een enveloppe had gehaald, sloot ik snel de ogen en bad ik snel in gedachten: "Genadige God, laat hoop mijn lege en kille geest weer vruchtbaar maken."