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**Loneliness and death in two novels by Jacoba van Velde**

In his postscript to Jacoba van Velde's *Verzameld werk* (Collected Work) August Hans den Boef writes: "On 7 September 1985, Jacoba van Velde passed away in Amsterdam, at the age of eighty-two, author of one of the few postwar international successes in Dutch literature, sister of the painters Bram and Geer van Velde and a crucial figure in the introduction of modern French theatre into [the Netherlands]. She had not been forgotten, in many newspapers her passing away was mentioned, and several 'in memoriams' full of praise appeared" (226). And, indeed, her most famous novel *De grote zaal* (The Big Ward), which appeared in 1953, was reprinted eight times, last in 1987, and was translated into twelve foreign languages. However, since the last reprint of her book we have heard little of van Velde, no doubt because of the slim volume of her literary output, in total encompassing two short novels and ten stories. But in view of the fact that the themes she deals with – principally loneliness, fear, and the process of dying – are eternally topical, and, in addition, given the original structure of her narratives, it is entirely justifiable to draw the attention of the reading public again to her work.

The main subject matter of the powerful *De grote zaal* is the description of the dying process of the heroine Trui van der Veen. A widow, she has had a stroke, and since her only daughter Helena lives in Paris with her husband and for that reason can stay only for a short period of time in Holland, she has to be taken to an old age home. It has two wards. She is placed in the small ward, which makes sense to her, because in the initial stage of her recovery she needs a lot of care. She assumes that she will be transferred to the Big Ward of the title of the book when her health has somewhat improved. But that supposition turns out to be wrong: the big ward is for the hopeless cases, the terminally ill. Halfway through the novel her eyes are opened when she visits Mrs. Blazer, who is in the sun room adjacent to the big ward. This still energetic woman is temporarily placed there because there is no room in the small ward, definitely not because she is terminally ill. She tells Trui van der Veen: "In the time I have been here, I have already seen three people die. It is terrible that we have to witness that every time. Everybody who is lying here can no longer get up. First they go to the room where you are now, then they come here, and then... it is the end." (*De tijd dat ik hier ben, heb ik al drie mensen zien*

sterven. Het is vreselijk dat we dit iedere keer moeten meemaken. Allen die hier liggen kunnen niet meer opstaan. Eerst gaan ze naar de kamer waar u nu bent, dan komen ze hier, en dan ... is het afgelopen.) (49)

Of the five well-known stages through which the terminally ill pass, formulated by Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross in her 1971 book *On Death and Dying* - denial and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance - the denial phase can be easily seen here. After her stroke, Trui van der Veen cannot use one of her legs; she asks the doctor whether that will change in the future. The doctor is evasive, but then she thinks: "Perhaps it is better this way. Now I can still believe something which I don't believe anymore, but which I still want to believe." (Misschien is het beter zo. Nu kan ik nog geloven aan iets dat ik niet meer geloof maar waar ik nog aan geloven wil.) (15) Some days later, the superintendent tells Mrs. van der Veen that after the coffee break she is allowed to get up for half an hour. But Trui does not want to: "As long as I am lying in my bed, I am a patient, like thousands, tens of thousands of other patients. Everywhere. But once I am up and go through that door to the salon, then I belong to them, to the old women who cannot look after themselves any more." (Zolang ik in mijn bed lig ben ik een zieke, zoals er duizenden, tienduizenden zieken zijn. Overal. Maar als ik eenmaal op ben, door die deur ga naar de zitkamer, dan hoor ik bij hen, bij de oude vrouwen, die niet meer voor zichzelf kunnen zorgen.) (21).

In essence, Trui van der Veen has always been a timid woman who was inclined to efface herself, thinking always first of other people and of ways to help them. For that

reason, it is understandable that the stages of anger and bargaining are virtually not represented in the novel. But depression is; here it is experienced as fear (*angst*). Mrs. Diepenhorst has passed away before her son, for whom she had desperately been waiting, can reach the home. During the night Mrs. van der Veen is awakened with a start by a noise and does not know what has happened, and Mrs. Jansen informs her that Mrs. Diepenhorst has been taken away. Trui is overcome by an intense fear and wants to run away. She remembers a night in the past when she was overcome by a similar fear, but at that time her husband Willem was still alive, and he had this wonderful capability of consoling her. But now Willem is dead. "I feel such fear, the fear presses on my chest like a heavy burden and makes it almost impossible for me to swallow. If only you were here ... But even if you were here, could you help me now? Or ... or ..." (Ik ben zo bang, de angst drukt als een zware last op mijn borst en maakt dat ik bijna niet slikken kan. Als jij nu hier was... Maar als je hier was, zou je me nu ook kunnen helpen? Of ... of ...) (76)

Then she remembers what her daughter Helena told her once: "Man is so terribly lonely, my dear mother. Some people, the majority, are not aware of it. Sometimes, because of a great sorrow, when nobody and no reasoning can help anymore, they suspect it. But most of the time they forget again, and perhaps that is for the best." (De mens is zo verschrikkelijk eenzaam, mijn lieve moedertje. Sommigen, de meesten, zijn er zich niet van bewust. Een enkel keer, bij een groot verdriet, wanneer geen mens of redenering meer kan helpen, dan hebben ze er een vermoeden van. Maar meestal vergeten ze het weer, en misschien is dat goed.) (*ibid.*)

And Trui realizes that, without her knowing it, her daughter had already been aware of the human condition at an early age.

The most distinct and original device in the narrative structure of the novel is the use of two first-person narrators. The bulk of the tale is told by Trui van der Veen, but her story is several times interrupted by accountsgiven by her daughter Helena. This mode of narration offers the author the possibility of returning to a given event from a different point of view. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. van der Veen is not aware of what has happened to her: "Where exactly am I? How did I get here? I can't remember. It looks like a hospital, because it was surely a nurse who was standing at my bedside this morning. I pretended to be asleep. She went away again. They are all old people. Just like me." (Waar ben ik eigenlijk? Hoe ben ik hier gekomen? Ik kan het me niet herinneren. Het lijkt wel een ziekenhuis want het was zeker een verpleegster die vanmorgen bij mijn bed stond. Ik deed of ik sliep. Ze is weer weggegaan. Het zijn allemaal oude mensen. Zoals ik.) (11) Helena, however, can tell us how her mother got there: "She did not know that she was put on a stretcher. It was difficult to get her out of the room. The corridor and the stairs are narrow. Hey, Dick, one of them said, who was already out in the corridor with her legs, slant her a bit. Dick, who was still standing with her head in the room, said: Turn her carefully. She'll fall off in a moment, I said. Don't worry, missus, he said, she's firmly strapped on." (Ze wist niet dat ze op de brancard werd gelegd. Het was moeilijk haar uit de kamer te krijgen. De gang en de trappen zijn smal. Hé Dick, zei de een, die al op de gang stond met haar benen, houd haar een beetje schuin. Dick, die nog

met het hoofdeinde in de kamer stond zei: Voorzichtig draaien maar. Direct valt ze eraf, zei ik. Geen zorg mevrouwetje, zei hij, ze is goed vastgebonden.) (18-19)

Helena has to return to Paris to be with her husband Jean, and the leavetaking is another example of the use of two narrators. In Helena's words: "What a sad goodbye! She tried so courageously to keep back her tears. Until the last moment. And all those people who were sitting around! Why didn't they have the courtesy to go away? But they can't, they have only their dormitory. I will try to come back soon, mommy, I said. Of course, miss Lous said, she'll come back. You needn't get so upset." (Wat een triest afscheid! Ze probeerde zo dapper haar tranen in te houden. Tot het laatste ogenblik. En al die mensen die erbij zaten! Waarom hadden ze niet de kiesheid weg te gaan? Ach, dat kunnen ze niet, ze hebben alleen maar hun slaapzaal. Ik zal proberen gauw terug te komen, mammie, zei ik. Wel ja, zei juffrouw Lous, ze komt toch weer terug. U hoeft zich toch niet zo van streek te maken.) (66)

Or in Mrs. van der Veen's account: "In another five minutes the train is going. She is most likely sitting in the compartment and thinking of me, as I think of her. Oh, Helena, don't go away, don't go away! No, I mustn't think that, otherwise something may happen. She has to go to Jean. But what can I do here without her? Now it is time, the signal for departure is given, the train is moving. I have to think of something else. But of what! I cannot stand this feeling of emptiness, of loss!" (Nog vijf minuten dan vertrekt de trein. Ze zit nu waarschijnlijk in de coupé en denkt aan mij, zoals ik aan haar denk. O, Helena, ga niet weg, ga niet weg! Nee, dat mag ik niet

denken, anders gebeurt er misschien iets. Ze moet naar Jean gaan. Maar wat moet ik zonder haar beginnen? Het is de tijd, het vertreksein wordt gegeven, de trein rijdt. Ik moet aan iets anders gaan denken. Maar aan wat! Dit gevoel van leegte, van verlaten zijn is niet uit te houden!) (*ibid.*) However close the relationship between mother and daughter may be, by means of the narration in two parts the author shows that in the final analysis each person has to face up to life and fate alone.

Another interesting feature of the mode of narration, clearly visible in the above quotations, is the lack of either quotation marks or indentation in the rendition of dialogues. It seems that the author wants to show that Trui van der Veen, from the moment of her stroke until her passing away, experiences life as a jumble of emotional impressions. But then, this is also applicable to her daughter.

The sad plight of Mrs. van der Veen's period in the *rusthuis* is made far worse by her surroundings, consisting of old women who are basically in the same boat. The realization that one is at the end of one's life has to be experienced under the piercing eyes of people who, because of the emptiness of their existence, follow the development of the illness of other patients with keen interest. The more or less safe place to be alone is the toilet, but unfortunately the place is usually soaking wet and there is never any paper. Moreover, the catch is broken, with the result that there is no real privacy even there. It leads to a comical incident: miss Lous opens the door and asks: "Do you plan to live here?" (Blijft u hier wonen?) (68) Finally, the simplicity of the language used greatly contributes to the reader's impression of how smarting the inner

pain of these unfortunate people must be.

Van Velde's second short novel *Een blad in de wind* (A Leaf in the Wind) was published eight years after *De grote zaal*, in 1961. Although it was not as successful, by 1987 it had been reprinted four times. The heroine is called Helena, like the daughter in *De grote zaal*, but whereas in the latter novel the mother dies when Helena is thirty-eight, the Helena of *Een blad in de wind* loses her mother when she is only eight. There is, however, an important link between the two novels, and that is the fear from which both heroines suffer; indeed, it is the *leitmotif* of the second novel. And in this respect both works are known to be autobiographical. De Boef mentions in his postscript that, when Jacoba van Velde was about seventeen, she had a most terrifying dream in which she became aware of her mortality. The experience was unbearable and it continued to torment her for years, she said later. But her many activities during a long life testify to the fact that she found a way to live with this frightening feeling.

The terrible dreams of the Helena of *De grote zaal*, on the other hand, haunt her only for a relatively short time. Her girlfriend Neeltje persuades her to attend Sunday school. The teacher tells the children many biblical stories and, among them, the one about the Great Flood. She also shows pictures of little children who were not taken into Noah's Ark and with frightened pale little faces are awaiting the moment of their drowning. Helena confesses to Neeltje that she thinks that God is not nice to let that happen. Neeltje immediately replies that it is forbidden to say something like that and that Helena will now, beyond any doubt, go to

hell. Thinking of this, Helena becomes very distraught, but something far worse follows. One day in elementary school Neeltje is sitting next to Helena and during the drawing hour draws a little man and shows him to Helena, who asks in a whisper why he has three legs. Neeltje whispers back that he doesn't have three legs, that the middle one is his little thing (*zijn dingetje*). At that moment a hand takes the drawing away, and the teacher's voice sounds very shrill as she tells Helena that she should be ashamed of making such dirty drawings. And Neeltje keeps silent, so that everybody thinks Helena is the culprit. "For a week I had the most horrendous dreams. I was persecuted and punished and all the time I was alone. There was never anybody who wanted to help me. Screaming with fear, I awoke and always there were the still safe arms of my father and mother for me, in which I found refuge. Only much later did the dreadful knowledge of human loneliness come." (*Een week lang had ik de afschuwelijkste dromen. Ik werd achtervolgd en gestraft en altijd was ik alleen. Nooit was er iemand die me helpen wou. Gillend van angst werd ik wakker en altijd waren er dan de toen voor mij nog veilige armen van mijn vader en moeder, waarin ik schuilen kon. Veel later is pas het ontzettende weten gekomen van de eenzaamheid van de mens.*) (58 - 59) Fortunately for Helena, during a conversation with the principal the truth comes out, but the incident has given Helena a sharp blow and she continues having attacks of terrible fear. However, she learns to cope with them.

Not so the Helena of *Een blad in de wind*. She does not succeed in getting a handle on her agonies, and in the end she succumbs to them. At the beginning of the novel she

travels by train to Paris. "Why did I take this trip? Yesterday I knew. I was standing on the beach and suddenly it was as if a veil was pulled away that had prevented me from seeing, I knew what I had to do: not to wait any longer, not to wait and see like a lamb, but to show my free will, to be a free human being. The proud joy I felt. Oh, God, how ridiculous it seems today." (*Waarom ben ik hier naar toe gegaan? Gisteren wist ik het. Ik stond op het strand en plotseling was het alsof er een sluier weggetrokken werd die me verhinderd had te zien. Ik wist wat ik doen moest: niet langer wachten, niet langer als een lam afwachten, maar mijn vrije wil tonen, een vrij mens zijn. De trotse vreugde die ik voelde. O god, hoe belachelijk lijkt die vandaag.*) (108) From "er een sluierweggetrokken werd" until "De trotse vreugde die ze voelde" the text is literally repeated at the end of the novel, however with the important difference that the first person pronoun of the beginning is replaced by the third person. Thus, it can be said that the mode of narration is a circular one: the end phase coincides with the beginning of the story. The very opening of the novel reads, however: "Gare du Nord" (*ibid.*). Helena has decided to commit suicide as the only way to put an end to her unbearable feelings of loneliness and desperation. She is particularly motivated by an image that returns to her. She was once an extraordinarily talented dancer – a talent that she shares with her author, van Velde – and formed a duo with a homosexual named Maurice. They successfully performed in all the major capitals of Western Europe. At a certain moment they are in Paris, not far from the Eiffel Tower. Suddenly there is an uproar and they go closer to the tower. It turns out that a young woman has jumped off the tower to

her death. Helena has a chance to look at her face and is struck by the expression of sublime peace on it. She obviously decides that she must do the same thing. However, when she travels back to Paris from Holland, she becomes the victim of a throng of doubts, and hopes to find solace in writing down an account of her past experiences. The bulk of the narrative consists of this account.

At the beginning of the tale the reader does not know why the heroine is so desperate and the reasons are revealed piecemeal. Thus the narrative structure of the novel is such that the originally successful dance career of the heroine is described against the background of a coming catastrophe. The culminating point comes when Helena is aware that she is no longer capable of fighting the returning feelings of horrendous fear. "One evening, during their dancing, she had thought: in sixty years at the utmost, nothing will be left of all these people but a heap of bones. Maurice had looked at her and afterwards had said furiously: 'Helena, it cannot go on like this. With such a face you cannot dance.' No, she could not dance any more." (Op een avond, onder het dansen, had ze gedacht: over hoogstens zestig jaar zal van al deze mensen niets meer over zijn dan een hoopje beenderen. Maurice had haar aangekeken en naderhand woedend gezegd: 'Helena, dat gaat echt niet. Met zo'n gezicht kun je toch niet dansen.' Nee, ze kon niet meer dansen.) (177) Helena had thought that Maurice would be very upset by the thought of having to look for another partner, although it would not be too difficult to find one. It is a sharp blow to her that he isn't.

It may be that van Velde wrote the novel in an attempt to free herself from her torment-

ing fears, and that she let her heroine follow the same route. But the last lines of the novel show that writing down her life story has been for Helena a solitary exercise and gives but faint hope: "On the upper shelf of the narrow mirror cupboard, I put the many sheets I wrote. Someone will find them, perhaps read them..." (Op de bovenste plank van de smalle spiegelkast leg ik de vele blaadjes die ik geschreven heb. Iemand zal ze vinden, ze misschien lezen...) (204)

#### REFERENCES

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