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Of stones and trains: Monika van Paemel's *De eerste steen*[1]

Monika van Paemel was born in 1945 in Poesele near Ghent. Her parents were abusive, and she spent much of her childhood with one or the other set of grandparents, one in the country near her birthplace and one in Antwerp, a city she loves to this day. At the age of nine, she fell seriously ill and spent some years in a sanatorium in the Kempen. It was quiet and she read a lot, and the stay there was probably her psychological salvation. Then she lived with a foster family to finish her convalescence, went to a Catholic boarding school in Turnhout, got a university degree in business administration, and was working for a publisher when her first novel, *Amazone met het blauwe voorhoofd* (1971) won a prize and launched her on a full-time career as a writer. In rapid succession she wrote *De confrontatie* (1974) and *Marguerite* (1976), but it was another nine years before the appearance of the long novel *De vermaledijde vaders* (1985), a confrontation with her father (she has no idea if he ever read it) and with men who use power to cause destruction. *De eerste steen,* which I discuss here, appeared in 1992 - after another long gap, we shall see why - an autobiographical work called *Wedervaren* in 1993, and her latest novel *Rozen op ijs* in 1997.

She has always had to earn her living by other means than writing novels, and the list of her activities is long. She has published poetry, short stories and feminist criticism, edited a Dutch literary review called *De gids*, written for radio and TV, hosted a radio show on which women phoned in and discussed their problems, cooperated on the publication of the works and letters of the 18th-century writer Belle van Zuylen (also known as Isabelle de Charrière) , headed the Flemish branch of the international organization of writers known as PEN and sat on its Peace Committee, campaigned in defence of Salman Rushdie, been part of *De groep van honderd* (a movement of writers concerned with the environment), written a regular column of political commentary for the magazine *Knack*, and been persuaded by a body called the *Staten-Generaal van de gemeenten* to head an appeal for the government to send humanitarian aid to the former Yugoslavia (alas, the *Balkanactie* failed and she swore she would never let herself be used by politicians again[2]). All this activity, corresponding both to her interests and to the need to put bread on the table, was crowned in 1993 with a signal honour. King Baudouin, in what proved to be the last investiture before his

death, raised thirty-one Belgian citizens to the peerage (twenty is a more usual number), including the first four women ever to be made baronesses in their own right. Till then the only baronesses had been the wives of barons; now van Paemel's husband, the architect Theo Butzen, was a baron because he was the husband of a baroness. Monika van Paemel said only that she hoped that now her participation in the causes she fought for would carry more weight with authorities.

Mention of her husband, however, leads us to speak of a personal tragedy behind the public persona. She married Butzen in 1963 and they had two daughters. Alas, in 1985 one of them, a teenager, took her own life. At least, that seems to be the case. Van Paemel herself refused to say that in so many words, not even in her autobiography. However, she has said what a terrible and mysterious thing the epidemic of teenage suicide is, and in *De eerste steen* the chief character's daughter has committed suicide. Several years later van Paemel, an eminently frank and literate interviewee, having already written and published *De eerste steen*, still stumbled when she tried to speak of the loss: "But when you lose the child or the child loses herself - then it's - you feel - it's hard to explain -"[3] In another interview she said she would never get her daughter's death out of her mind. Writing about it, clearly, is not a cure: "I can't write anything out of myself, but I can give form to the things that happen to me. To be sure, that sets me free, even though I have to keep on giving them a form all over again."[4]

The plot of the novel in which she gives form to this grief, she said, is very simple: "Woman has lost child, flees toIsrael, looks for consolation, comes back to Belgium and tries to go on living there."[5] We see two differences here already between real life and fiction. Monika van Paemel presumably still has her other daughter, whereas May, the chief character in *De eerste steen*, had only the one child; and the author did not flee to Israel for consolation. She could not have afforded to drop everything and go there for an extended period. In fact she had friends there already, went to Jerusalem for a writers' conference, and felt she had to explore this country. On her second visit she knew it would be part of her novel, because the parallel between Israel's situation and her own was too close to ignore: "In Israel there is not one undamaged person. ... Israel was for me the horribly enlarged reality, a real-life example of the hopelessness of grief that isn't contained, that is passed on from generation to generation and makes life so sick that people can no longer live with it."[6] From the character of May, perhaps, we glimpse van Paemel's personal struggle: those close to someone who commits suicide feel guilt. Somehow, she fears, her bitter feelings about her own childhood affected her relations with her daughter, who could not stand the burden of them. We see here an unverifiable hypothesis, a feeling which you cannot ease by talking it over with the child, she is no longer there. Van Paemel goes on to say that it is tragic to be a survivor, because you are not fully alive. Like a soldier in the trenches, you observe yourself rather than experiencing life, you become depressive or passive. She quotes what she wrote in the novel about May: "From now on there was a

shield between her and things." [7]

Indeed, she admits that for some years after her daughter's death she could not write a novel. Elsewhere she says she never stopped writing, but no doubt she meant that she carried on with her public work; it is a different matter when the one subject you *must* write about is too painful for you to face. She rented a house to begin writing again, in Mechelen, far from the scene of the death, but offering symbols for what she wanted to do: it was located on the Jeruzalemsteeg, in a house with rubble on either side of it and trees growing out of the rubble (life pushing through destruction), isolated but in the middle of a busy immigrant neighbourhood - among people different from her, Others. Not that she locked herself up for three years without interruption: she had her public duties, she was for two years a guest lecturer at the University of Groningen, she paid more visits to Israel, but to write the novel she spent periods in isolation.

The product of these years is at first sight bewildering. Several critics remarked on that; indeed one complained: "Monika van Paemel confuses confusing with confused."[8] In the first few pages we are introduced to fifteen or twenty people, by name only, as crowded together on the page as they are in their damp leaky basement in Jerusalem. It takes the reader a while to grasp that of all the third-person characters, May is the central one, the narrator: we realise we are reading her feelings and memories, whereas the others are stating them out loud. We have read a good third of the novel before we learn the cause of May's depression - her daughter jumped in front of a train - and only at the end does the reason, so long bottled up and not faced, burst out of her: the girl had been sexually abused by a teacher whom she admired. But that was only the immediate cause: the mediate cause was the burden of May's own grief that she unwittingly laid on the child, just as all around her the Israelis laid the grief of the Shoa, the Destruction - the Holocaust as we call it, but a sacrifice acceptable to God it was not - on all its citizens, many of whom lived outside the continent where it was committed or were born after it. Perhaps because the girl typifies this larger problem, she is never named.

Van Paemel has said that this delay of the outburst of grief and fury occurs because May is from Flanders, an affluent society. We don't think it is right to express our emotions. Other people's emotions are embarrassing, we don't know what to say, we sidle away.[9] That was one of the two ideas in her mind, as topics to write about, when she first went to Jerusalem. The second was that, if we see the Other as the enemy, we end up mistrusting even ourselves.[10] In time she added two more themes. One is the problem our society causes itself by believing you have to be young, beautiful and successful - "a Winner" - in order to earn self-respect.[11] The other is, in her own words, "The motto of *De eerste steen* was: man is always free, but he has to know it. that's my experience." [12] And these more universal themes, she insists many times, are the novel's subject; her personal life is not, even though a novelist may make her most intimate confessions in her fiction without knowing it.

One interviewer commented about the

novel: "You build up a static whole, piece by piece."[13] Yes, said van Paemel, and a stable one. The manuscript was three times as long, and no more can be deleted without unbalancing the work. And indeed, as the reviewer in the *Haagse Courant* said (after saying the novel was written with "the unmistakable baroque manner of a Fleming," which sounds a little provincial of him), "the book is a model of unity of form and content."[14] It would take a chapter in a book-length critical study to demonstrate this. The fact that May cannot even speak of her daughter's death till far into the novel, and not say why it happened till almost the end, is an example of this. The structure reflects the time it takes to confront the memory of the traumatic event: that is how grief works.

It would take another chapter in that hypothetical study to analyse the symbolism of the scenes of the action. In the first part May and all the other wounded survivors live in a damp leaky basement in Jerusalem: a grave, clearly. This will be a story of emotional death and resurrection. The place is also, as a critic remarked, a useless bunker that will not defend them against their various griefs, for those are within them, and in reality they need to get out of there and confront life again.[15] This May does in stages.In the second part of the novel she lives in Mechelen on the Jeruzalemsteeg, but in a tower. As May recovers, she paints one room of the tower after another - paints them white. In the third part she is back in Jerusalem, living in a house (not hers, admittedly) on a hill, in the middle of life again.

A third chapter of the study would trace all the different connotations of the imagery in the novel. Two examples must suffice here: trains and stones. The trains are the simple case: trains represent death. May speaks of the trains that took millions of Jews to be slaughtered, long before we find out that a train killed her daughter. Stones, on the other hand, are so ubiquitous (Israel is a stony land) that they are one of the great unifying elements of the novel. From the meanings spotted by the critics,[16] we may form groups.

First of all, the title refers to Christ's rebuke of the people who were going to stone a woman to death: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." The question of guilt is thus raised in our minds before we even open the novel. Throwing stones is also an act of hatred: Palestinians throw stones at Israelis. As van Paemel has said, "you *lay* the first stone in order to build something, you *throw* it in order to destroy something."[17] For the Palestinians, Israel's very existence is a stone of offence; for the Israelis, a stone is a place to stand, somewhere firm, and they are taught "to defend their land to the last stone".[18] One critic quotes the proverb "dan komt de onderste steen boven" (things are turned upside down), seemingly referring to the reversal whereby the Jews, from being Hitler's victims, have come to wield power over the Palestinians.[19]

Then there is the stone as witness - Moses set up a stone to witness that his people had accepted the Ten Commandments - and a stone for May to lay her head on - Christ remarked that foxes had burrows and birds had nests, but the Son of Man had no stone on which to lay his head.

Christ had no true home on this earth, and May is a nomad. As today we all are, says van Paemel: "We are all trying to define ourselves by memories, by events, by confrontation with others, instead of by sticking with the certainties of earlier times: country and race."[20] We are getting into more personal stones here, so to speak. There is the philosopher's stone that solves all problems, which May does not find, for it does not exist. There is her daughter's gravestone, which is like a stone on her heart, and which can perhaps be equated with the stone in front of the grave that May has shut herself in (symbolised in the Jerusalem basement), which must be rolled away to let her grief be reborn and take its course and let her resume living and loving. That return to life is symbolized in the final image of the novel, her daughter as the rose of Jericho which grows in the desert, and which according to tradition must be watered with tears in order to bloom.[21]

Van Paemel also uses stone imagery in the interviews she gave. She says of the relation between her life and her books: "From my biography I have sawn out the stones with which I have built my books."[22] And elsewhere, she gives one of her definitions of what she intends to do with the rest of her life: "To resist time as sluggishly as a stone."[23]

These are the aspects of the novel that critics discussed when it was published. It was an eye-opener for me to see the standard of criticism in Dutch and Flemish provincial newspapers. On Monika van Paemel, at least, they have greatly improved. When I read the press file on her at the time of the publication of *De vermaledijde vaders*, in 1985, I found only one useful item, and that was an interview with the author herself. When *De eerste steen* came out in 1992, she gave several equally excellent interviews, but they were distinguished not only by her frankness and her insight into the writer's task, but also by the intelligence of the questions the interviewers asked her. Let us give her the last word, as an indication that this article is by no means an exhaustive study of her novel:

> "I work with images and invest in the stylistic powers of the language, and I hope to make something many-sided, that is reread, and yields up new images every time ... people are struck by an image, and so they don't have to understand it, it has so many facets that it works as poetry."[25]

NOTES

[1] This article is based on the voluminous file of press clippings about Monika van Paemel kept in the Archief en Museum voor het Vlaamse cultuurleven in Antwerp. I thank the staff for allowing me to read the file.

[2] *Metro* 20 January 1999.

[3] "Maar als je verliest het kind of het kind verliest zichzelf - dan is dat - je voelt je - dat is moeilijk uit te leggen" (*De Morgen* 3 April 1992; quotations from *De Morgen* are from this interview unless indicated otherwise).

[4] "Ik kan niets van me afschrijven, maar ik kan aan wat me overkomt een vorm

geven. Jazeker, dat is bevrijdend, al zal ik er altijd opnieuw een vorm aan moeten geven" (*Gazet van Antwerpen* 20 March 1993).

[5] "Vrouw heeft kind verloren, vlucht naar Israël, zoekt daar troost, komt terug naar België en probeert daar opnieuw te leven" (*De Morgen*).

"In Israël leeft geen enkel ongeschonden mens. Israël was voor mij de verschrikkelijk uitvergrote realiteit, een konkretisering van de hopeloosheid van het verdriet, verdriet dat niet ingepolderd is, dat daardoor altijd aan de volgende generatie wordt doorgegeven en het leven zo verziekt dat mensen er niet meer mee kunnen leven" (*ibid.)*

[7] "Voortaan zat er een schild tussen haar en de dingen."

[8] "Monika van Paemel verwart verwarrend met verward" (*Het Nieuwsblad* 21 March 1992).

[9] *De Morgen*; *Het Belang van Limburg* 24 March 1992.

[10] *Gazet van Antwerpen* 14 March 1992 and *Elsevier* 28 March 1992.

[11] *Het Volk* 18 April 1993, interview with Carlos Alleene.

[12] "Het motto van *De eerste steen* was: de mens is altijd vrij, alleen hij moet het weten. Dat is mijn ervaring" (*Het Belang van Limburg* 27-28 September 1997).

[13] "U bouwt stuk per stuk een statisch geheel op" (*De Morgen*)

[14] "de onmiskenbare barokke allure van een Vlaamse ... het boek is een toonbeeld van eenheid tussen vorm en inhoud."

[15] *De Nieuwe Gazet* 28 March 1992.

[16] I here reorder observations by critics in various papers, notably *De Nieuwe Gazet ibid.* and *De Standaard* 21 March 1992, as well as in the review *Streven* Sept. 1992 p.998-1003.

[17] "... de eerste steen léggen doe je om iets te bouwen, de eerste steen góóien om iets te vernietigen" (*De Nieuwe Gids* 12 March 1992).

[18] "hun land tot aan de laatste steen te verdedigen" (*ibid.*)

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] "Iedereen probeert zichzelf te defineren door herinneringen, door de geschiedenis, door de konfrontatie met de anderen, niet meer door voort te gaan op de zekerheden van vroeger: het land, de stam" *(De Morgen)*

[21] *Vrij Nederland* 21 March 1992, *Haagse Courant* 3 April 1992.

[22] "Uit mijn biografie heb ik de stenen gezaagd waarmee ik mijn boeken heb opgebouwd" (*Elsevier* 12 March 1993).

[23] "Traag als een steen de tijd weerstaan" (*De Morgen* 12 March 1993).

Perhaps my favourite among her definitions of her role is: "Ik neem me voor een oud kreng te worden dat als een stout kind blijft roepen dat de keizer geen kleren aan heeft" (*De Morgen* 29 September 1993: "I intend to become an

old bitch who goes on shouting like a cheeky kid that the emperor has no clothes"). And my favourite of her remarks about men: "veel onzin die mannen vertellen of hun pompeusheid komt ook uit het feit dat ze doorgaans hun eigen onderbroeken niet wassen, en zeker niet die van een ander" (*ibid.* 12 March 1993: "a lot of the nonsense men talk, their pomposity, stems from the fact that they never wash their own underpants, let alone anybody else's").

[24] "Ik werk met beelden en investeer in het stilistisch vermogen van de taal, en hoop zoiets te maken dat veelzijdig is, dat wordt herlezen, dat telkens weer andere beelden oplevert. ... Mensen worden getroffen door een beeld,dat ze daarom niet hoeven te begrijpen, maar dat zovele facetten heeft dat het werkt als poëzie" (*ibid.* 3 April 1992).