CHAPTER TWO
CARING FOR ROOSJE

Introduction

The narrative construction of life stories reveals judgements about care. This chapter deals with the novel Roosje, written by the journalist Gerard van Westerloo about his mother; she had a joyless childhood in a Catholic orphanage.\(^1\) I will analyse this story as an evaluation of two care practices: the charitable care practice that Roosje experienced and the motherly care that she gave Gerard, his brothers and his sister.\(^2\)

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Fig. 6. A group of children in The Providence in Noordwijkerhout during the time Roosje Vonk lived there.

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\(^1\) Gerard van Westerloo, Roosje (Amsterdam, 1994).

\(^2\) A similar ‘double story’, also beginning with the death of the mother, is told by Carolyn Steedman in Landscape for a Good Woman (London, 2005). Gerard’s brothers Ed and Fons are well known journalists as well, and Fons owns a Dutch broadcasting company.
Firstly, the novel can be viewed as a tribute by a son to an ordinary mother who gave quality to his life by creating a safe and loving home for him. This biographical story serves also as a kind of expressive articulation, since the son explains his mother’s feelings of inadequacy because of what happened to her in a Catholic asylum in her youth. Thirdly, this story can be read as a moral complaint and as a narrative revealing the blind spots in charitable care. The son places the responsibility for this deficient care especially on his mother’s female relatives and the sisters in The Providence.

Van Westerloo arrives at this negative judgement by the way in which he stages his reporting of past events. In that staging four mechanisms can be discerned: a) the selection of facts is questionable; b) there is an arbitrary selection of which experiences are to be described; c) certain matters have been presented as wilful actions while others have been portrayed as unavoidable; d) and present-day standards have been applied to the past. Two questionable presuppositions inform Van Westerloo’s story. The first is that caring is a concern for women rather than men; the second is that the Catholic charity of the sisters was utterly reprehensible.

Reconstruction of a Life Story

The biographical portrait Roosje is a brief but impressive biography by the journalist Gerard van Westerloo about his deceased mother whose maiden name was Roosje Vonk. Throughout her life her behaviour had always been calm and cheerful, but this was not the case during her last days, when she was heard to utter inaudible sounds and to growl with anger. This was not how the four children, assembled around her bed, knew their mother. What was bothering her? Who had this girl and young woman been before she became Mrs. Van Westerloo, a wife, and the mother of Gerard, Ed, Fons and Tineke? Roosje opens with a memory of the afternoon after her funeral. The entire family went to the seaside: “We drank and ate something. Our children rolled down the dune in their Sunday clothes—and we felt an enormous love for the woman who had been our mother.” Gerard thinks motherhood was the life fulfilment that she had chosen with heart and soul, but this image

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