



# Mendelssohns' cosmopolitan map and Solstad's rural Telemark

Genealogy and geography in *La carte des Mendelssohn* and *Det uoppløselige episke element i Telemark i perioden 1591–1896*

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## Abstract

This article makes a comparative analysis of *La carte des Mendelssohn* (2015), by the Belgian novelist Diane Meur, and *Det uoppløselige episke element i Telemark i perioden 1591–1896* (2013), by the Norwegian novelist Dag Solstad. It examines how these two original literary projects explore different modalities of the relationship between genealogy and geography in order to challenge established forms of historical family narratives. Solstad's text is anchored in the local, circumscribed to the rural areas of the Norwegian region of Telemark, while Meur's text is an exploration of cosmopolitanism; however, they come together in exposing the profound interconnectedness between people and places and its relational productivity.

## KEYWORDS

Belgian literature, genealogical narratives, literature and geography, non-fiction novels, Norwegian literature

## 1 | CHALLENGING GENEALOGICAL NARRATIVES

Printed on the opening page, facing the first chapter, of *La carte des Mendelssohn* (2015) (Mendelssohns' map), written by the Belgian author and translator Diane Meur (born 1970),<sup>1</sup> there is a family tree showing the descendants

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of the German Jewish Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1826).<sup>2</sup> Placed at the threshold of the text, as a thematic frontispiece, the family tree establishes genealogy as a central topic. However, the value of the family tree is immediately undermined by the incipit:

Au commencement, il y avait un homme... Eh bien non. Au commencement, il n'y a jamais un homme, ni une femme d'ailleurs, ni même un homme et une femme, pas plus qu'il n'y eut un premier jour et une première nuit. Ce sont des multitudes d'ancêtres dont le nom s'est perdu, de plus en plus nombreux et incertains à mesure qu'on remonte, si bien qu'on en arrive à ce constat déroutant pour les grands gosses que nous sommes : dans ce domaine, il n'y pas de commencement.

(Meur, 2015, 11, emphasis in original)

(In the beginning, there was a man... Ah, but no. In the beginning, there is never one man, nor one woman for that matter, nor even a man *and* a woman, no more than there was a first day and a first night. It is a multitude of ancestors whose names are forgotten, more and more numerous and uncertain as we go back, so much so that we arrive at this observation, disconcerting for us grown-ups: in this area, there is no beginning.)<sup>3</sup>

Where the family tree, as an isolated unity, has a clear point of origin, in this case Moses Mendelssohn, this passage seeks to dissolve its clearly determined structure by pointing to how the tree only constitutes a segment of a much larger system, whose point of origin is undefinable.

The opening lines of Meur's text not only undermine the authority of the family tree, but also the genealogical narrative, which the opening phrase "Au commencement" ("In the beginning"), through its allusion to Genesis and the genealogical enumerations of the Old Testament, anchors in a long Judeo-Christian tradition. Rejecting the notion of an identifiable "beginning," Meur indicates that the genealogical narrative, like the family tree, creates an erroneous linear stringency in the representation of family relations, where certain bloodlines are given preference over others to ensure that the narrative appears meaningful and perspicuous. Thus, she suggests that it is arbitrary how we think about and represent family and kinship. The transformation of family relations into a narrative is structured by contingent historical conditions, such as the preference given to patriarchal or, more rarely, matriarchal lines of connection; or, as in this case, the accentuation of one particular person, Moses Mendelssohn, on the grounds of his achievements and fame.

Meur's reflections on the arbitrary aspect of family narratives were born from the idea of a fictionalized biography of the Mendelssohn family, taking as its point zero the German banker Abraham Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, son of the famous philosopher Moses and father of the even more famous composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Meur becomes fascinated by the intermediate position that Abraham occupies between these two *monstres sacrés* of European history:

Quel merveilleux sujet de roman, m'étais-je dit alors. Et quelle intéressante situation historique ! Être le fils d'un philosophe des Lumières mort trois ans avant la Révolution française, être le père d'un compositeur romantique mort l'année précédant le Printemps des peuples, et de cette vie placée sous le signe de l'entre-deux—entre deux génies, entre deux dates charnières—, n'avoir rien fait, ou rien de marquant. Un roman sur le vide et sur les filiations.

(Meur, 2015, 17–18)

(What a marvelous topic for a novel, I had told myself back then. And what an interesting historical situation! To be the son of an Enlightenment philosopher who died three years before the

French Revolution, to be the father of a Romantic composer who died the year before the Spring of Nations, and of this life placed under the sign of interspace—between two geniuses, between two historic dates—, to have done nothing, or nothing of importance. A novel about emptiness and kinship.)

If Abraham's intermediate position intrigues the author, so does his historical situation, which would lend itself to a specific kind of genealogical narrative, one where "the notions of family and pedigree have served as powerful images for the discourse of nationhood, the emergence or transformation of collective identities and communities" (Welge, 2014, 2). Seemingly, the Mendelssohns are ideally suited for the creation of an historical family novel.

Two obstacles, however, stand in the way of this project. The first concerns Meur's self-perceived preferences and capacities as a novelist, considering herself "incapable d'écrire une fiction à partir de faits historiques réels" (Meur, 2015, 142; "incapable of writing fiction based on real, historical facts"). If we understand the historical novel as a fictionalizing of real-life events, Meur situates her project in opposition to this literary model. The second obstacle concerns the scope of the material: as her investigation and archival excavation progresses, Meur is increasingly drawn into the vast network of family relations, seduced by the numerous, intriguing stories of various members of the Mendelssohn clan, which disqualifies the linearity characteristic of traditional genealogical narratives (Welge, 2014, 3). The material finally takes on such dimensions that Meur no longer feels capable of shaping it into a coherent narrative.

Instead, she decides to turn her own research on the Mendelssohns into the plot of the novel, and herself into the protagonist:

Et c'est seulement en mars 2013, lors d'un bref retour à Berlin, que j'ai compris que je n'écrirais pas le roman des Mendelssohn mais le roman vécu de ma recherche sur les Mendelssohn, dont je serais le seul personnage répondant à mes critères du personnage de fiction, puisque je ne connais pas d'avance ma propre vie (façon de vous dire que j'ignore absolument où, quand et comment finira ce livre).

(Meur, 2015, 143)

(And it is not until March 2013, during a short return visit to Berlin, that I realized that I would not write the novel of the Mendelssohns, but the self-experienced novel of my research on the Mendelssohns, of which I would be the only character meeting my requirements for a fictional character, since I don't know in advance my own life (a way of telling you that I completely ignore where, when, and how this book will finish).)

Having thus rejected both the model of historical fiction and of the genealogical narrative, the text moves into the discursive mode of the *non-fiction novel*, the representation of real-life events through the storytelling techniques of the novel. The text is presented as the recording of Diane Meur's archival and literary exploration into the Mendelssohn clan, with Diane as the primary "character." The family novel can be understood, following Robert Boyers's definition, not only as the depiction of various, individual members of a family, but as "the illumination of social process," showing how "families grow, take shape, influence members" (Boyers, 1974, 3). Meur's project departs from this understanding, but expands the focus by giving us insight into social processes primarily on a *metalevel*, depicting the exploration into the complex networks that constitute a family.

The procedure resembles that of Meur's French colleague Emmanuel Carrère, whose "romanesque du réel" (Demanze, 2014, 5; "novelistic of the real") interweaves factual subjects with stories from his own life.<sup>4</sup> Similarly to Carrère, Meur has created a non-fiction novel where her autofictional persona serves as an instance of transmission, comparison, and interpretative processing with regard to the factual subject matter. However, a significant

difference between the two lies precisely in the subjects they investigate. Where Meur deals with a complex genealogical network, Carrère tends to focus on more restrained subjects and single, illustrious persons.

The way in which Meur's book thematizes genealogy invites us, therefore, to compare it with a contemporary work coming from a completely different corner of the European literary landscape: Scandinavia. *La carte des Mendelssohn* has fascinating parallels with a book by Dag Solstad (born 1941),<sup>5</sup> published in 2013. Solstad, one of the most acclaimed Norwegian novelists of the last 50 years, deals with questions concerning the narrative representation of historical material and family relations in *Det uoppløselige episke element i Telemark i perioden 1591–1896* (The insoluble epic element in Telemark in the period 1591–1896).<sup>6</sup>

Solstad's book is presented as the literary transformation of historical material provided primarily by "en nøyaktig slektstavle" ("a precise genealogical table") of the author's maternal grandmother, Birgithe Andersdatter Tveitan, and "en likeså nøyaktig slektstavle" ("a just as precise genealogical table") of his maternal grandfather, Hans Bertinius Brynildsen Tveitan (Solstad, 2013, 5). In both cases, we are faced with a book labeled *novel*,<sup>7</sup> which takes a genealogical table or a family tree as its main point of departure. I shall examine the similarities and differences between these two singular projects, explore how they relate to the problem of representing family relations in literary form, and show how the overwhelming nature of the vast genealogical material led both authors to turn to geographical models in order to contain and anchor their texts.

## 2 | THE REFUSAL OF INVENTION AND THE EXPLORATION OF NEW LITERARY MODELS

Seemingly in contrast with Meur's text, which opens with the dismissal of the hierarchical structure of the family tree, Solstad treats the genealogical table as a solution rather than a problem: the table is the model on which he will structure his text, with a nod to the genealogical representations of the Old Testament, the very same that Meur rejects in her opening lines.<sup>8</sup> At first glimpse, therefore, there is a major difference between the two projects: Solstad goes through with the attempt at transforming the genealogical material into a narrative, whereas Meur circumvents it. Like Meur, however, Solstad sets his project in explicit opposition to a certain idea of the historical novel, with its fictionalizing of historical material. A central aspect of Solstad's project is the declared refusal of literary invention, or the attempt to reduce it to a minimum:

Jeg kunne nå ha gitt en skildring av denne kongehylling i april 1591. [...] jo, det kunne nok ha vært verdt en skildring, men jeg avstår. [...] Gjennom det naturtro ved rekonstruksjonen av denne historiske begivenheten ville mine seks forfedre få et liv og en egentyngde, et historisk nærvær, som det dessverre er åpenbart at de ikke har for meg, 420 år etter at de faktisk opptrådte på den historiske scenen. [...] Derfor må jeg avstå. Det har med metode å gjøre. Jeg har valgt begrensningens metode i denne bok. For meg betyr det å dikte å la være å dikte. Jeg vil ikke være på ville veier. Jeg vil inn til sakas kjerne.

(Solstad, 2013, 11–12)

(I could now have given a portrayal of this royal tribute in April 1591. [...] yes, it could have been worth a portrayal, but I refrain from it. Through the faithful reconstruction of this historical event, my six ancestors would have been given a life and a gravitas, an historical presence, which is sadly obvious that they do not have for me, 420 years after they actually appeared on the historical scene. [...] I therefore have to refrain from it. It has to do with method. I have chosen the method of limitation in this book. For me to create literature [*dikte*] means to refrain from inventing [*dikte*]. I do not want to be adrift. I want to reach into the core of the matter.)

Solstad aims to find this “core of the matter” in the restricted amount of available historical facts about his ancestors, accessible through the genealogical table as well as through church books, local history books (“bygdebøker”), songs, and similar folkloristic sources and local historical sources (p. 7). He has claimed that this literary method was inspired by the Norwegian non-fiction author Espen Søybe, whose biographical “archival studies” aim to present archival material without dramatizing or inciting any empathy in the reader (see Fidjestøl, 2013).<sup>9</sup> For Solstad, a condensed form of story is meant to appear out of the collection and textual representation of historical data, bringing the story down to “the insoluble epic element” signposted by the title.

In one of his essays, Solstad describes this notion as one of two guiding principles in his literary production,<sup>10</sup> defining it in the following terms:

[D]et uoppløselige episke element betyr det i en roman som ikke kan tilbakeføres til psykologisk kunnen, historisk forstand, sosiologisk skarpsinn, metafysiske kollbøtter og lignende, men som er det som hviler utelukkende i seg selv. (Solstad, 2016, 289)

(The insoluble epic element refers to that in a novel which cannot be brought down to psychological knowledge, historical sense, sociological acumen, metaphysical somersaults, and so on, but that which rests in and of itself.)

With his “Telemark novel,” Solstad has sought to combine this creative principle with Søybe’s non-fictional archival method, in what we might term an *archival novel*. The goal seems to be the creation of a narrative emanating from a specific literary transcription of raw historical facts. In other words, genealogy replaces plot.

The question can be raised as to what really distinguishes Solstad’s text from the local history books that constitute his source material. For the Norwegian critic and scholar Frode Helmich Pedersen, the difference supposedly resides in a specific literary style, in Solstad’s “kunstferdige setninger” (artful sentences), which are meant to make “de fortidige livene [...] lyse sterkere og klarere” (Pedersen, 2014; “the past lives shine stronger and brighter”) than in his sources. But Pedersen is doubtful that the novel is successful, or indeed a novel at all, where other critics have considered it a literary masterpiece (Børdahl, 2014).

I would add, though, that it is not only literary style, but also an important element of literary self-reflexiveness that distinguishes Solstad’s text from local history books: it is a novel about a man looking for his ancestors (Minken, 2014).<sup>11</sup> Just as Diane Meur is the primary character of her novel, Dag Solstad is the protagonist of his. In other words, both authors establish an autofictional and self-reflexive framework around their historical explorations, albeit in distinctly different ways. For where Meur’s persona is consistently present throughout the text, that of Solstad is more withdrawn, appearing only in occasional, metanarrative passages, as well as in his very position as *descendant*, in the sense that it is *his* roots the text is tracing.

In a way that resembles Solstad’s refusal of invention, Meur claims having had to resist the temptation of treating the historical figures in her material as novelistic characters:

la religieuse Franziska Veit [...] à quarante-cinq ans, a rompu ses vœux pour épouser le veuf de sa sœur (quel roman ! on aimerait en savoir plus). (Meur, 2015, 195)

(the nun Franziska Veit [...] at the age of 45, broke her vows in order to marry her sister’s widower (what a novel! one would love to know more about it).)

Faced with raw historical and biographical data, both novelists stage their authorial temptation to invent from the given material, only better to highlight their refusal to do so. Thus, they accentuate their dismissal of the traditional historical novel as well as of a conventional form of family narrative where, according to Robert Boyers,

“family relations [are] treated as a function of individual psychology” (Boyers, 1974, 8). The refusal to invent means refraining from imagining the inner voice of the characters.

That said, the two authors base their dismissal of the historical family novel on different reasons. Solstad does so mainly on the basis of an unsurmountable distance that separates him from his sixteenth-century ancestors, making them “uforståelige for oss” (Solstad, 2013, 30; “incomprehensible to us”); for Meur it is not distance, but the vastness of her object of study, a family network that appears as ungraspable, which makes the material impossible to put into a satisfactory narrative form. Seemingly, also, the two projects relate differently to the concept of the genealogical table. While Solstad structures his text around it, Meur rejects and replaces it, as we shall see, with a different model: the spatial representation of a map.

Having abandoned the genre of the historical family novel and discarded the literary value of the genealogical tree, Diane Meur explores different alternative models of handling and representing the material: she divides the family relations of the Mendelssohns into “blocks” or “lines” (Meur, 2015, 66) only to discover “loops” (“boucles”) (p. 67) that disturb the attempts at creating a manageable system. These various systems for organizing the material only work to a certain extent before collapsing: “Je sens que ce système de diagrammes ne fonctionnera pas longtemps” (p. 149; “I feel that this system of diagrams will not work for long”). The challenges posed by the overwhelming material have to do with knowledge organization, but also with literary composition. In her dismissal of the traditional genealogical narrative, Meur situates her project in the antinovelistic tradition going back to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767; 1997). Like Sterne’s eponymous narrator, Meur continuously digresses and fears never to be able to finish her project, as new members of the Mendelssohn family keep being born and growing up, giving her work an asymptotic character (pp. 395, 458). How to write real lives, how to capture them within the boundaries of a circumscribed text: these are the compositional and philosophical questions that Meur’s project revolves around.

Dag Solstad presents his readers with a similar metaperspective on the handling of the historical material, by evoking the problems encountered and displaying some of the ensuing compositional choices:

Jeg har bestemt meg for å forandre den ytre komposisjonen i denne romanen. Opprinnelig hadde jeg tenkt å la alle Birgithe Andersdatters forgjengere bli presentert i en eneste stor bildevev, riktignok i noenlunde kronologisk rekkefølge, gjennom slektene i Bø, Sauherred, Hitterdal, Drangedal og Seljord, men problemet med å få inn slektningene fra Seljord når jeg egentlig er i gang med å fortelle om ættene i Bø, og Hitterdal, har overbevist meg om at jeg må foreta en kompositorisk forandring. (Solstad, 2013, 129–130)<sup>12</sup>

(I have decided to change the external composition of this novel. Initially I had planned to let all of Birgithe Andersdatter’s ancestors be presented in one large tapestry, although in a more or less chronological order, through the families in Bø, Sauherred, Hitterdal, Drangedal, and Seljord, but the problem of inserting the relatives from Seljord when I am really in the process of telling about the families in Bø, and Hitterdal, has convinced me that I have to make a compositional change.)

The issue of narrative order is particularly important here. The inherent bifurcation of genealogy forces the author to choose which lineages to follow, how far to follow them, if and when to return to other lineages, and so on:

Vi kunne fortsatt å holde oss i Tveitan-området, og f.eks. fulgt oppdelingen av gårdene i Tveitan ytterligere, og det kommer vi virkelig også til å gjøre, men først skal vi til Li nordre igjen for å følge utviklingen der i de første tretti årene av det 19. århundret (1800-tallet). (p. 235)

(We could have continued to stay in the Tveitan area, and for example followed further the partition of the Tveitan farms, but first we will return to Li nordre in order to follow the development there in the first 30 years of the nineteenth century (the 1800s).)

It is symptomatic for these metanarrative passages that place names stand in for family lineages, pointing to the key role of geography in Solstad's novel.

### 3 | SPATIAL TURNS

Geographical place and space play a major role in both literary projects. In Meur's case, her struggle with different models of representing the overwhelming material on the Mendelssohn family gradually begins to find its form by taking on a spatial character:

J'y découvrais avec terreur que le Mendelssohn-Komplex avait déjà alimenté de nombreux travaux, articles, ouvrages, remontant pour certains au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, bref que j'avais affaire à *un véritable champ*.

(Meur, 2015, 142, emphasis added)

(I discovered to my horror that the Mendelssohn-Komplex had already given life to numerous works, articles, books, some of them going as far back as the nineteenth century, in short that I was dealing with *a veritable field*.)

Although the use of the term "champ" could be perceived in this isolated occurrence as a dead metaphor, its double meaning is confirmed by the qualification of being "véritable," which draws the attention to the literal denotation as a physical *field*, as well as by several spatial metaphors introduced on the following pages—the family becomes a "fleuve" ("river") that ends up "en pleine mer" ("in the middle of the ocean") (pp. 162–163). It is symptomatic, however, that this spatiality takes on a general, non-nominal character, in contrast with the more specific and nominal spatiality of Solstad's account on Telemark. This difference points to a significant distinction between the two texts, one that we shall come back to below, which is the different dimensions of their respective geographical explorations: the local and the rural dominate Solstad's text, while Meur's text resides on a notion of cosmopolitanism.

In *La carte des Mendelssohn*, the spatiality reflected in the field metaphor soon begins to merge with the temporal nature of the material, with the result of breaking up the linear order of history. Meur represents herself as

un personnage trottant en bottes de sept lieues dans un parc temporel de deux ou trois cents ans bondissant en avant, en arrière ou en diagonale sur l'échiquier de la Terre, car le *Mendelssohn-Komplex* couvre quatre des cinq continents. (Meur, 2015, 143, emphasis in original)

(a character trotting in seven-league boots in a time park of two or three hundred years, jumping forward, backward or diagonally on the chessboard of the Earth, for the *Mendelssohn-Komplex* covers four of the five continents.)

Moreover, in a Faustian, dreamlike chapter entitled "Une nuit de Walpurgis" ("Walpurgis Night"), the merger of space and time is taken one step further: Meur imagines anachronistic encounters between temporally separate parts of the Mendelssohn clan, merging different historical periods into one place (pp. 253–271). The genealogical and historical hierarchy is dissolved and replaced by a co-presence in space and time.

Meur's literary treatment of space and place is in several ways similar to, and probably also a result of, the so-called *spatial turn* of the Humanities and Social Sciences that began in the 1980s, and which has had a significant impact on Western culture. This turn entailed a reversal of the hierarchy of time and space in the understanding of human culture: where temporal perspectives had once dominated, the spatial aspects of culture were now given greater attention (Collot, 2014, 15–16). Similarly, the step that Meur makes towards an interest in spatial co-presence and away from genealogical hierarchization and its narrative counterpart, the diegetically linear family story, constitutes what we could call the novel's own *spatial turn*. Meur's book is an example of culture writing back to the social sciences, in this case to the discipline of geography, by referring to her project as a "cartographie" (Meur, 2015, 315; "cartography"). The novelist's own spatial turn reaches its paroxysm when her author-character conceives of the idea of transforming the family relations of the Mendelssohns into a physical map—referred to by the title—made out of labels containing the name, date of birth and death, profession, and religion of each family member.<sup>13</sup>

The map renders visible, in one large overview, the different connections between and across generations of the Mendelssohn clan, in a material version of the co-presence enacted in the Walpurgis chapter. As the French critic Camille Thomine has indicated, this cartographical co-presence also serves as a symbol for the various textual forms that Meur's book embraces (Thomine, 2015, 16). But it is the intellectual as well as physical creation of the map itself that, from this point on, becomes the central narrative of the text. Meur's non-fiction novel thus appears as a metatext on the impossibility of the family narrative and the subsequent transformation of kinship relations into a new, spatial model. In other words, where Solstad replaces plot with the model of genealogy, Meur makes use of a geographical model to remedy the shortcomings of the genealogical table.

Both projects, however, situate genealogy in a particular relationship with geography. Where Meur opens with the family tree only to replace it with the map, Solstad's book initially does the opposite. The inside of the cover contains a map of Seljord, Bø, and Drangedal, reinforcing the geographical marker of the title: this is a book about the Norwegian region of Telemark. The map literally frames the text, which in turn opens with the mention of the genealogical tables that form its primary material. As opposed to Meur's map, which reflects the cosmopolitanism of the Mendelssohns and covers "four of the five continents" (Meur, 2015, 143), Solstad's map is locally anchored and place-specific, covering not even the whole of Telemark. But the novels have in common that they negotiate the relationship between two distinct forms of organizing and representing information: the map and the table/tree.

Already on the opening pages, Solstad's text moves from the topic of genealogy and historical facts to the topic of place:

Det er dette overveldende materialet av levd liv som man bare, i beste fall, ser sporene av, som et navn, et årstall, et sted, som har fascinert meg så sterkt at jeg nå har skredet til verket, og atter en gang prøver å gjøre det eneste jeg duger til her i livet, og det er å skrive romaner. Jeg vil beskrive dette Norge. Dette skogkledde Telemark, med fjellvidder, vann og elver. Det foregår i Telemark. I dette landskapet som er så godt som ubevegelig i det meste av de 300 årene jeg skal beskrive det. Stillestående. Dette skogkledde landskapet, hvor det stadig hogges, trær faller, men skogen står der, urørlig, uforanderlig omkring mennesket og dets hest. (Solstad, 2013, 7)

(It is this overwhelming material of lived life that we can only, in the best cases, see traces of, like a name, a year, a place, that has fascinated me so much that I have now set to work, and once more am trying to do the only thing I am capable of in this world, and that is writing novels. I want to describe this Norway. This wooded Telemark, with mountain plateaus, lakes, and rivers. It takes place in Telemark. In this landscape that has been as good as immobile for most of the 300 years of which I will describe it. Quiescent. This wooded landscape, where continuously there is felling, where trees are falling, but the forest is there, immovable, unchangeable around humankind and its horse.)



In contrast with the “overwhelming material” that the genealogical table and the historical facts offer, the almost immobile landscape of Telemark provides a sense of continuity, by remaining more or less unchanged after its inhabitants have disappeared into the darkness of history. In Solstad’s spatial turn, geographical place and space remedy the elusive and restrained character of the historical material. This geographical sensibility is in line with many of Solstad’s earlier novels, notably with *16.07.41* (2002), as is his interest in the articulation of geography and history (Krouk, 2007, 171). At the same time, the Telemark novel represents a geographical shift, from the urban to the rural.

Rural *places*, in particular, continue to play a major role in Solstad’s text, zooming in on an even smaller local scale: “Denne romanen kommer til å dreie seg mye om gården Tveitan og de omliggende områdene” (Solstad, 2013, 88; “This novel will center much around the farm Tveitan and the surrounding areas”). As the text progresses, it is a limited number of farms, whose names are historically more stable than those of the people living there, that provide fixed points for the reader.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with the name customs dominating rural Norway until the naming law of 1923, people would receive their surnames from the names of their homesteads, changing names when moving from one farm to another, prompted by marriage, purchase, or other social and financial reasons. As people are born, grow up, procreate, move, and die, the farms remain a constant, providing a counterbalance to the overwhelming genealogical variation and circumscribing the narrative to a limited area and a restricted number of places. Geographical place structures the genealogical exploration in Solstad’s text.

#### 4 | THE RELATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY OF NAMES

To be more precise, it is the *relation* between people’s names and place names that form the material for Solstad’s text, constituting the “traces of life” from which to write the story:

Før omkring 1600 er de navnløse, de kom av jord, og etter en stund så ble de igjen til jord, og det var det [...]. Fra 1600-tallet av får de navn, og et sted de er født, og et sted de har dødd, og hvem som er deres foreldre, og hvem de har vært gift med. Det er det. Men det gir spor av liv, av et helt liv. (Solstad, 2013, 402)

(Before around 1600 they are nameless, they came from dust, and after a while they returned to dust, and that was it [...]. From the seventeenth century on they have names, a place where they are born, and a place where they have died, and who their parents are, and who they have been married to. That is it. But it provides traces of life, of a whole life.)

Solstad writes as if the simple juxtaposition of names is productive in and of itself, an idea that is reflected in the syntactical structure of his text, dominated by hypotactic and recursive constructions:

Her bodde han [Ole Rolleivson] i sitt andre gifte med Ingeborg Jonsdatter, datterdatter av Egelev Herbrandsdatter, som i sin tid hadde vært bondekone på Nordigård, gift med Brynnil Haraldson, som i sin tid dukket opp på Gravgjord og krevde sin rettmessige odel til denne gården, som i flere år hadde vært drevet av hans farbror Andres Eivindson, og som dermed startet alle de ulykkene som skulle ramme mine forfedre og min slekt fra da, og dessuten mor til den vellykkede eier av Nordigården, Harald Brynnilson. (p. 242)

(Here he [Ole Rolleivson] lived during his second marriage, with Ingeborg Jonsdatter, granddaughter of Egelev Herbrandsdatter, who in her time had been the farmer’s wife at Nordigård, married to Brynnil Haraldson, who in his time appeared at Gravgjord and demanded his allodial right to this farm, which over several years had been run by his paternal uncle Andres Eivindson, and who thus

started all the misfortunes that were to fall upon my ancestors and my kin from then on, and also the mother of the successful owner of Nordigården, Harald Brynnilson.)

While these constructions serve to mimic the genealogical table, the text also anchors the names of the ancestors in their relation to the names of the farms. Thus, a form of narrative emerges from what we might call a toponymical and geographical inflection of genealogy, where the relation between names (place and personal) is what produces the history of Telemark. This resembles the heuristic function of literary cartography as it is understood by Franco Moretti, for whom the identification of relations between locations on a map produces meaning (Moretti, 2007, 54–56). In literary form, Solstad expands this relational productivity to apply for people *and* places, in a merging of genealogy and geography.

The juxtaposition of names and their relational productivity are similarly important aspects of Diane Meur's project. The dimension of the historical material, in the form of people and places, is so great, however, that the relational structure is threatened with collapse. As a novelist, Meur is in need of a place, which appears problematic when working with the geographically disparate history of the Mendelssohns:

Éclatée entre tant de lieux et d'époques, l'histoire des Mendelssohn ne pouvait se rattacher à aucune spatialité unique. Or, pour écrire un roman, j'ai besoin d'être *quelque part*.

(Meur, 2015, 190, emphasis in original)

(Dispersed over so many places and periods, the history/story of the Mendelssohns could not be attached to any single spatiality. But precisely in order to write a novel, I need to be *somewhere*.)

In other words, the spatial turn of her literary project appears as an insufficient solution as long as it cannot be anchored in a particular place. Paradoxically, the cosmopolitan spatiality of Meur's exploration warrants a *location*, bringing it closer to Solstad's locally anchored project.

In one sense, it is the Mendelssohn family, as it is represented on Meur's map, that becomes the place, as the narrator perceives the relationship between the family members as an object for topographical description:

[M]on lieu romanesque, ce serait la famille elle-même dans ses différentes strates, avec ses sommets illustres, ses blocs erratiques, ses combes ténébreuses. Et pour m'approprier ce lieu encore abstrait, il allait falloir que j'en dresse un relevé topographique. Que j'en trace la carte, que je m'en fasse une représentation concrète sur un plan embrassable d'un seul coup d'œil. Une fois cette tâche accomplie, il devrait bien se passer quelque chose, en naître du roman.

(Meur, 2015, 190)

(My novelistic place, it would be the family itself in its different layers, with its illustrious peaks, with its unstable blocks, its tenebrous valleys. And in order for me to appropriate this still abstract place, I would have to draw a topographical layout of it. To trace its map, to create for myself a concrete representation of it on a surface graspable with one glance. Once this task is completed, something ought to happen, something novelistic ought to be born from it.)

The map helps the author turn the Mendelssohn family into a singular entity, becoming the "lieu romanesque" that she needs in order to write her novel. As the final sentence indicates, Meur aims for the novel text to *emerge* from the topographical relationship between the elements provided by the historical data, in a way not unlike Solstad's toponymical approach.

## 5 | THEMATIZING THE STRUGGLES OF THE AUTHOR

The literary value of both texts seems to stem primarily from the authors' common choice of tying the geographical approaches to their own subjective quests as authors. If, as Bertrand Westphal has argued, the map constitutes a "réduction du monde" (Westphal, 2007, 101; "reduction of the world") by "privilegi[ant] le nom au detriment de la phrase et de la variation" (p. 101; "privilege[ing] the name at the expense of the sentence and of variation"), it is precisely the self-reflexive accounts of Dag Solstad's and Diane Meur's literary and archival explorations that save their texts from the trap of nominal reductivity. In Mai Elisabeth Berg's reading of Solstad, it is the author's own quest as a modern subject trying to approach the historical reality of his ancestors that becomes the important topic of the text (Berg, 2016, 217). This interpretation connects Solstad's project even closer to Meur's account of her own archival exploration, both dealing with the metaliterary, but also very much practical, struggles of the author.

The perception of the Mendelssohn family as a metaphorical place, transposable to a topographical representation that is supposed to make it graspable on a physical map, does not completely remedy the author's need for a proper, geographical place to turn into the "lieu romanesque." Meur's initial reflex is to identify a "capital" of the Mendelssohns in Berlin:

Berlin n'avait pas quelque chose à voir, mais *tout* à voir avec les Mendelssohn. Si cette famille avait été un pays (me disais-je innocemment, sans me douter que ce pays, j'irais un jour jusqu'à en tracer la carte), Berlin en aurait incontestablement été la capitale.

(Meur, 2015, 19, emphasis in original)

(Berlin did not have something, but *everything* to do with the Mendelssohns. If this family had been a country (I said innocently to myself, without knowing that I would one day go so far as to draw a map of this country), Berlin would undoubtedly have been its capital.)

However, as the project progresses, this anchoring is threatened by the discovery of the vast geographical dispersion of the Mendelssohns.

As a result of this dispersion and the aforementioned merging of time and space, the genealogical material begins to take on a rhizomatic character, in the sense of a non-linear and potentially infinite structure (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, 22). This character is strengthened by the methodological possibilities offered by the Internet, which generates an explosion of available, historical material, and consequently accelerates the growth of the physical map Meur is constructing:

Je commençais à m'en rendre compte : ce qui me fascinait dans cette généalogie de Moses, c'était l'aspect de réseau, de rhizome, de maillage, et même ma façon de réfléchir en était contaminée. Au lieu de suivre linéairement un individu ou un thème, je le rattachais à tous les autres individus ou thèmes qu'il m'évoquait, je ne pensais que grille, trame, arborescence, entrelacement de nœuds et de liens... Et je me demandais si j'aurais raisonné ainsi quinze ans plus tôt, quand Internet n'avait pas encore à ce point envahi notre vie.

(Meur, 2015, 188)

(It began to dawn on me: what fascinated me in this Moses' genealogy was the aspect of network, rhizome, mesh, and even my way of thinking was contaminated by it. Instead of following linearly an individual or a topic, I attached it to all the other individuals or topics that it brought to my mind,

I thought nothing but grid, weave, arborescence, interlacing of nodes and links... And I asked myself if I would have reasoned this way 15 years earlier, when the Internet had not yet invaded our lives to this degree.)

Not only does Meur's use of Internet searches facilitate the steady growth of information, but it also contaminates her way of thinking, privileging the perspective of the network and the rhizome, stretching out in all possible directions, and thereby posing a challenge to the textual circumscription of the genealogical material.

What the work with the map does, then, is to review the initial reflections on the arbitrariness of depicting family relations. The merging of time and space that Meur's work with the maps brings forth, also uncovers the ultimate consequences of the project, a reconstruction of the genealogical network of mankind:

Grâce au travail des dernières semaines, la famille Mendelssohn est bien devenue un espace pour moi. Le temps même s'est comme spatialisé. Toutes ces petites étiquettes, me dis-je parfois, ce sont les briques dont est faite l'histoire humaine, sa matière première : des myriades d'individus qui sont nés, ont vécu et puis sont morts. Mais, dans le même temps, la notion de famille s'est peu à peu vidée de son sens, à trop y réfléchir. Mes ressortissants de la génération 7 n'ont pas seulement Moses et Fromet comme arrière-arrière-arrière-arrière-grands-parents, mais soixante-deux autres; soixante-deux autres qu'en théorie je pourrais pour chacun retrouver et localiser, finissant par reconstituer le maillage de l'humanité entière.

(Meur, 2015, 210)

(Thanks to the last weeks' work, the Mendelssohn family has really become a space for me. Time itself is as if spatialized. All these small labels, I tell myself sometimes, are the bricks of which the history of mankind is made, its raw material: myriads of individuals are born, have lived and then are dead. But, at the same time, the notion of family has little by little lost all its meaning, if we think too much about it. My inhabitants of generation 7 not only had Moses and Fromet as great-great-great-great-grand parents, but 62 others; 62 others that I could in theory find and localize for each of them, ending up with reconstructing the network of all mankind.)

The spatial turn of the map-making, combined with the perception of the rhizome produced by her web-based research method, allows Meur to picture her project in its vertiginously boundless aspects. If the main topic for Solstad is the unsurmountable historical distance between our ancestors and ourselves, where geographical place remains the only constant, Meur seems finally to struggle more with the rhizomatic dispersion of our own global and digital modernity. The need for place is therefore not only linked to the Mendelssohns, but also, and perhaps even more, to her own feeling of rootlessness and dis-anchoring with regard to her project.

## 6 | SPATIAL DISPERSION AND THE SACRALIZING OF PLACE

A central topic of Meur's novel, then, becomes the notion of *dispersion*, a notion that characterizes both the cosmopolitan nature of the Mendelssohn family and the author's archival and literary exploration. As the information gathered by Meur continues to accumulate, she becomes more and more overwhelmed, asking "jusqu'où [la] mènera cette dispersion galopante de [sa] pensée" (Meur, 2015, 306; "where this galloping dispersion of [her] thought will lead [her]"). The spatial and geographical dispersion of the Mendelssohns, a term which is not without allusion to the family's Jewish and diasporic origins, finds itself mirrored by the author's intellectual movements.

Geography and writing are thus united by the same figure, which threatens the fulfillment of the literary project by resisting circumscription.

At the same time, it is precisely in geography and writing that a possible solution resides, as a sort of *pharmakon*, the poison as remedy. The discipline of geography offers the tool of the map as a way of circumscribing the dispersion itself: “Ce que j’essaie de faire dans ce livre, c’est une *cartographie de la dispersion*” (Meur, 2015, 315, emphasis in original; “What I try to make in this book is a *cartography of dispersion*”). But this geographical solution only functions by being put into the literary form of the self-reflexive non-fiction novel, which allows Meur to turn the problem of the uncircumscribable subject matter into the very topic of the text, by “*thématis[ant] [sa] propre dispersion*” (p. 325, emphasis in original; “*thematiz[ing] [her] own dispersion*”). The literary project appears as drawn between two opposing forces: on the one hand, the temptation of giving in to this “dispersion galopante” (“galloping dispersion”), entailing the risk of getting lost in the rhizomatic meanders of humanity’s genealogy (and of the Internet); on the other hand, the need for a place of anchorage and identity to remedy this very dispersion.

And so, Berlin takes on another role, in line with the autofictional turn of the project, by becoming a central place for Meur to anchor herself, in her double function as the author and the protagonist. The chapter entitled “Journal de Berlin” (“Berlin Diary”) serves as a core chapter, establishing Berlin as a central “lieu romanesque.” While Berlin is an important identity marker for the Mendelssohn family, it is so to an even greater degree for Meur herself. In the narrative of a postmodern, digital era that has uncovered the rhizomatic aspects of genealogy, geographical place receives a salutary, if not sacred function:

Le lieu où l’on est... Dans ce roman où je saute sans cesse de sujet en sujet, je comprends à présent pourquoi j’ai eu besoin d’évoquer de plus en plus les lieux où je me trouvais ou que je connaissais [...]. Un réflexe salutaire. À l’ère d’Internet, nous avons l’impression de pouvoir être partout à la fois ; mais rien ne remplace la présence réelle, et [...] il n’arrive pas grand-chose d’intéressant dans des lieux qui n’en sont pas. (Meur, 2015, 381)

(The place where you are... In this novel where I jump ceaselessly from topic to topic, I now understand why I needed to mention more and more the places where I was or that I knew [...] A salutary reflex. In the age of the Internet, we have the impression of being able to be everywhere at once; but nothing replaces real presence, and [...] not much interesting happens in places that are not real.)

Despite the possibilities offered by the virtual world of the Internet, constituting the *sine qua non* of Meur’s genealogical excavation, the need for a real, physical experience of place is paramount:

L’ancienne adresse de Bella Salomon est maintenant dans un immeuble moderne avec des studios pour touristes, à côté du restaurant de kebabs *Luna de Istanbul*. J’aurais pu le constater sur Google Maps, mais ça ne m’aurait fait ni chaud ni froid. (p. 382, emphasis in original)

(The old address of Bella Salomon is now in a modern building with studios for tourists, next to the kebab restaurant *Luna de Istanbul*. I could have verified it on Google Maps, but that would have left me neither warm nor cold.)

Meur tries to balance the cosmopolitan and rhizomatic spatiality of the Mendelssohns with a certain awareness of the singular and the local. Moreover, the contrast established between looking up a place on Google Maps and actually going there physically, reflects what has become a trope in our digital age, namely how digitization has created a greater awareness for the material and the physical (Melot, 2004). We could ask if the digital, represented in terms of space and place by Google Maps, not only creates a greater awareness of the physical and material, but even seems to sacralize it in some sense, or at least makes it more precious.<sup>15</sup>

Although Diane Meur's and Dag Solstad's attempts at renewing the family novel differ with regard to the articulation of genealogy and geography, they come together in this quasi-sacralizing of place. At the end of Solstad's exploration, he reflects on how his mother, in her childhood reminiscences, would blend people and places:

Hun snakket om Pettersborg, som om det hørte sammen med hennes far, at det var hans Pettersborg, enda han var død, og det var hans enke, min mormor, og hans sønn, og dennes kone, og deres barn som bodde der. [...] Jeg lurte kanskje på om hun blandet sammen hagen på Kronborg ved Kragerø (og hagen på Pettersborg i Årøysund) med ham, på en uklar, nesten mytisk måte. (Solstad, 2013, 411–412)

(She talked about Pettersborg as if it was connected to her father, that it was his Pettersborg, even though he was dead, and it was his widow, my [maternal] grandmother, and his son, and the latter's wife, and their children who lived there. [...] I wondered if maybe she confused the garden at Kronborg near Kragerø (and the garden at Pettersborg in Årøysund) with him, in a vague, almost mythical way.)

It should be noted, though, that Solstad's refusal to create novelistic characters and plot, in a traditional sense of the term, allows him to avoid a romanticized appraisal of his ancestral home or a return to the conservative tradition of the *Heimatroman*. It is rather the interconnectedness itself, between people and places, that becomes the real literary matter for Solstad, no less than for Meur.

## 7 | A FINAL TWIST

Towards the end of *La carte des Mendelssohn*, the cosmopolitan family "Komplex" becomes a *mise en abyme* of humanity itself. For Meur, it is the notion of an interconnectedness situated in the rhizomatic network of mankind that allows her to explore the importance of geographical place in human identity, without falling into the trap of performing a geo-centric sacralizing of home: "Bien sûr que dans le monde tout est lié. La seule folie, c'est de se croire au centre" (Meur, 2015, 456; "Of course everything in the world is connected. The only madness is to imagine oneself at the center"). Nonetheless, both novels, in their reaction against the fictionalizing of historical events and the biases of narrative representations of family relations, turn to geographical place in order to remedy the literary and epistemological problems of dispersion and dissolution uncovered by their respective explorations. In Meur's and Solstad's common attempt to dismiss the use of literary invention—in the sense of creating fictional storylines as well as imagining psychological portraits of the historical personae—real, physical place becomes a way of anchoring the text, in a double meaning of attachment and depth.

In a final twist, Diane Meur inverts the vertiginous premise of her theoretically endless exploration by pointing to how the interconnectedness of humanity finally reveals that the world is very small:

Depuis que je vois l'histoire des Mendelssohn comme une histoire du monde, je mesure à quel point ce dernier est petit. Infiniment riche à observer, mais vraiment tout petit. (Meur, 2015, 446)

(Ever since I started seeing the history of the Mendelssohns as a history of the world, I gauge the extent to which the latter is small. Infinitely rich to observe, but really quite small.)

What finally distinguishes Meur's *La carte des Mendelssohn* from Solstad's Telemark novel is not the apparently different perspectives on the family tree, but rather the distinctly different geographical areas they deal with, and the relation that these areas entertain with history: the cosmopolitan space of the Mendelssohns, although anchored in Meur's own relationship with Berlin, is the space of global history.<sup>16</sup> For Solstad, on the contrary, global or even national history—History with a capital H—is a parenthesis to the micro-history provided by the genealogical material

of his ancestors and their attachment to the circumscribed area of Telemark: "I mellomtida har vi krig, nødsår, sult, Grunnlov, nasjonal uavhengighet, krig, ekstra skatter, bankerott og pengenød" (Solstad, 2013, 325; "In the meantime we have war, years of hardship, famine, Constitution, national independence, war, extra taxes, bankruptcy and poverty"). Precisely this difference, though, is what serves to highlight the importance of the novels' common denominator: their exploration of the profound interconnectedness between people and places, and its relational productivity.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Diane Meur has written seven novels and published a series of translations from German and English.
- <sup>2</sup> The family tree is taken from Sebastian Hensel's book *Die Familie Mendelssohn* (1879) (Meur, 2015, 10).
- <sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are my own.
- <sup>4</sup> Carrère has gained wide critical acclaim for his six non-fiction novels, beginning with *L'adversaire* (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Dag Solstad published his first novel *Irr! Grønt!* in 1969 and has written 18 novels and several short story collections, plays, and essays.
- <sup>6</sup> The English translation of the title was proposed by Lydia Davis in an interview, which also offers a good English-language introduction to Solstad's authorship (see Farsethås, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> The identification of Solstad's book as a novel has led to considerable debate among Norwegian critics and scholars. According to Tone Selboe, it is mainly a pragmatic argument that allows for the label in this case: Solstad has written a novel because he is a novelist. For Selboe, this exemplifies the fundamentally blurry boundaries between different forms of prose (Selboe, 2015, 120–122). For a summary of the debate, see Berg (2016).
- <sup>8</sup> Both novels seem to situate themselves in an intertextual relation to Thomas Mann's *Josef und seine Brüder* (1933–1943), in which the German novelist fills out what is in-between the genealogical enumerations of the Old Testament. In Meur's case, the intertextual connection is explicit (Meur, 2015, 154–155), whereas the link between Solstad's and Mann's novels has been identified by the critics (see Børdahl, 2014). However, Meur's and Solstad's common refusal to *invent* distinguishes their projects from Mann's, the in-between being reduced to a minimum.
- <sup>9</sup> Søbye put this method to use in *En mann fra forgangne århundrer* (2010).
- <sup>10</sup> The other principle being "motstandens epikk" ("the epic of resistance"), a will to be "utidsmessig" ("outdated") and to avoid the zeitgeist in everything he does (Solstad, 2016, 284).
- <sup>11</sup> For the historian Minken, Solstad's book is a good novel, but bad history writing.
- <sup>12</sup> See also p. 265, where Solstad again sketches compositional choices he could have made but opted out of.
- <sup>13</sup> A photo of the map is available on the publisher's website: <https://www.swediteur.com/titre/la-carte-des-mendelssohn/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Solstad's text constitutes a radical, non-fictional example of a larger tendency within contemporary historical fiction, with the use of *place* as structuring principle instead of characters, thus allowing for spatial circumscription of historical time. In novels such as Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room* (2009), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung* (2008), and Diane Meur's *Les vivants et les ombres* (2007), a house is what constitutes the stable point of the narrative, around which revolve a large number of characters going through several generations. In Meur's 2007 novel, the house is even the primary narrator.
- <sup>15</sup> This need for the physical and the material seems to correlate with an interest in the material and practical aspects of putting together the Mendelssohns' map. For instance, Meur makes a point of describing her difficulties in moving the immense map off the table every evening (Meur, 2015, 193).
- <sup>16</sup> For the French critic and historian Benjamin Caraco, Meur's novel invites us to reflect, not only on the narrative transmission of genealogy, but also on history writing as such (2016).

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**How to cite this article:** Haugen MW. Mendelssohns' cosmopolitan map and Solstad's rural Telemark. *Orbis Litter*. 2020;00:1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12262>