

N.P. van Wyk Louw, D.J. Opperman and the Afrikaans Literary Tradition ¹

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Abstract. In this paper a brief sketch is given of the development of the Afrikaans language and the literary tradition before the arrival of the two major poets of the mid twentieth century: N.P. van Wyk Louw and D.J. Opperman. These two poets created a type of poetry in which every word and image were functional and illustrated their craftsmanship and professionalism. As examples of their poetry two poems are discussed, one by each of the two poets: the centre piece of Louw's choric drama *Die dieper reg* and Opperman's "Nagwaak by die ou man." Whereas Louw's poem uses words which are marked by their intensity and poetic grandeur, that of Opperman illustrates his sober and economic style and the way in which he employs the short-circuiting metaphor and different layers of meaning. Both poets were able to "think" in terms of African images and to make the geography and history of their continent subservient to a greater purpose.

1.

N.P. van Wyk Louw (1906-1970) and D.J. Opperman (1914-1985) were the most prominent and leading Afrikaans poets of their time. For more than four decades they both stood in the centre of the whole literary scene in South Africa.

When Van Wyk Louw's and Opperman's first volumes of poetry appeared in 1935 and 1945 respectively, there already existed in Afrikaans an established literary tradition. The Afrikaans language in that initial pioneer circumstances and in the absence of any retarding influences of school and church had spontaneously developed, in the direction of deflection, from the Seventeenth Century Dutch of the early colonists – was the spoken language of the populace

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long before the Cape, in 1806, became a British Colony. It was, however, regarded as a low, bastard form and Dutch, as the written language and the language of culture, was used at all formal and public occasions and in schools and churches. Accordingly the earliest writings in Afrikaans were intended to mock the speakers of the language, to demonstrate to Dutch readers how the language at the Cape differed from that in Holland and to reproduce the language of the "coloured" population of the Cape. If there was a more serious use made of Afrikaans, its purpose was to convert readers to a particular political viewpoint.

In the eighteen-seventies the increasing prominence of Afrikaans was a direct reaction to the Anglicization policy of the British colonial government over the past decades. Political events in the independent republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State and the actions of the British in that area, created a feeling of solidarity among the Colonials with their northern "fellow countrymen," and led to an awakening of Afrikaner nationalism and the battle to gain for Afrikaans its rightful place. The literature that originated in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century is, as far as themes are concerned, limited by its close relationship with the fatherland in general and the struggle of the Afrikaner in particular.

After the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the most important new poets had the "natural" task of developing Afrikaans into a language of culture, to make of it a sensitive instrument through which the deepest emotions of the people and of the individual could be conveyed, and in this way to aid the movement towards the recognition of Afrikaans as, along with English, an official language of the country which it became in 1925. In this respect there is a clear relationship between the literature before and after the turn of the century and thus a great many of the products of the first fifteen years or so of the twentieth century are closely bound up with the language struggle and the history of the Afrikaner. In particular, the Anglo-Boer War and the reaction to it was an important stimulus for literature immediately after 1900, although the poems were not as closely wedded to the time and the struggle as the earlier ones and the best examples already possessed a universal validity.

In the nineteen-twenties there appeared poems from a number of poets which, with themes like rebellion against God, despair over the Afrikaner nation, and erotic passion were more individualistic than their predecessors. The renewal which this foreshadowed first made a definite appearance in the Thirties as N.P. van Wyk Louw and the other poets of his generation rejected the idea of a limited colonial literature and set themselves the ideal of a wider literature in which every passion or thought could be reflected. The poetry of that generation therefore swung away from the local and the typical; it became "a high and compelling task" and the poet a craftsman who strives for "technical perfection" and does not ask that his work, because of the Afrikaner "cause," should be judged by any standard other than that applied to foreign literature. From

spontaneous conversations and gatherings of, especially, the Cape writers there sprang a flourishing cultural life and an interest in art, music, politics and literature. The new poets wanted to create a type of poetry in which every word and image was pure and artistically satisfying. Their work strikes one also by its much greater professionalism in comparison with the work of the period before 1930. While the older Afrikaans poetry was strong on externals and committed to definite rhyme schemes and metrical patterns, the poetry of the Thirties was the result of a stricter and more developed craftsmanship which regarded its own work critically and made full use of the intellect in creative activity. Originally most of them were self-analytical and from a strong concentration on the self there arose the danger of a certain aestheticising, although in later work they swung away from this creed in the direction of symbolic and imagist poetry. In the work of N.P. van Wyk Louw, especially, this generation of poets reached a high point.

2.

To give you an idea of Van Wyk Louw's poetry, I would like to quote the centre piece of his choric drama *Die dieper reg* [*The Greater Right*] which he wrote in 1938 for the festival that marked the centennial of the Great Trek. The Great Trek was a large-scale migration of frontier farmers into the interior in the nineteenth century and was largely the result of friction between the colonists in the Eastern Cape and the Xhosa, an attendant series of border wars, and dissatisfaction with the British Government, which, though it had taken firm control of the Cape in 1806, had failed to provide security on the eastern frontier. Van Wyk Louw's play is set in the Hall of Eternal Righteousness to which the Voortrekkers have to go after death to hear judgement on their deeds. Awaited by the Heavenly Choir, the Voortrekkers, led by their Intercessor, come on stage to face the Prosecutor challenging the validity of their actions. After the pleas, the lamentations and the prayers, the Voice of Righteousness delivers his judgement. The whole Great Trek with all its deeds and motives is expressed as a lyrical and visionary drama which reaches its climax in the choric song directed to South Africa, the "wide and woeful land, alone / under the great southern stars" (Kannemeyer 1993: 40-41):

O wide and woeful land, alone
under the great southern stars,
will never an intense joy disturb
your calm unmoving grief?
You know the lone souls, unaware
of their own suffering and pain,
the far-off death upon the veld,
the burial small and brief.

Simple people who perform
 true and singly bitter things
 and singly fall like grains of seed;
 dumb deeds, small trust, small treachery
 of those who for another lord
 like serfs leave you in need.

Will never a mighty beauty come
 like hail-white thunderheads that bloom
 above your mountains' darkest stance,
 and never a deed occur in you
 to echo over earth, and taunt
 Time with its impotence?

A grandeur of so pure a gleam
 that people in remotest lands,
 hearing the rumour of your name,
 with eye unclouded, wild, shall stare
 like those old travellers in the night
 who saw, astounded, rim after rim
 new stars like flowers, lift and bloom
 out of your oceans' foam and fear. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 135) ²

The choric song in *The Greater Right* is one of the major poems in Van Wyk Louw's poetic oeuvre and the original speaks of great dedication to the "wide and woeful land" in words which are marked by their intensity and poetic grandeur. Something of this is conveyed in the translation by Guy Butler, one of the more accomplished English poets of South Africa, although I must admit that the almost devotional atmosphere of the original is not fully realised in the English translation. We know, of course, that the translation of poetry is a risky business. The Italians have a saying that to translate is to betray, while the French say that to translate a great poem, is to kiss another man's bride through a veil!

However, much of the poem's original quality is conveyed through Butler's translation. In this elegiac poem, which reminds one of the sustained psalms of the Old Testament, the chorus speaks of the "wide and woeful land" which lies "alone / under the great southern stars" and asks if somewhere in future there will not rise out of this country, which knows so much grief, pain, suffering, death and even disloyalty, a "beauty" of such magnitude that it will "taunt / Time with its

² Translated by Guy Butler.

impotence" and grant it a universal esteem. After the invocation the first stanza is dedicated to the suffering of people who died alone upon the veld, who did not have the chance to develop and who were laid to rest in a brief burial. The identity of these people remains vague, although the poet refers to them in the second stanza as "simple people," humble peasants who performed "bitter" deeds in their task as pioneers of a new country. These people's duty was not of such a nature that they could gain personal prestige or immortality, but to perform the humble daily tasks which are essential for the establishment of a new country and nation. And that they were farmers, we see in the agrarian imagery: they "singly fall like grains of seed." Not all of them could fulfil this simple task with the necessary dedication and left their people treacherously for what Van Wyk Louw calls "another lord," perhaps for mercenary reasons unfaithful to the high ideal of building a new nation.

Only at the beginning of the third stanza the question of the first stanza ("will never an intense joy disturb / your calm unmoving grief?") is carried further. The "intense joy," the nearly aristocratic happiness, is now being formulated as "a mighty beauty" which can inspire the inhabitants of the country to perform a "deed" which will "echo" over the earth, a deed which forms a contrast with the "dumb deeds" of the second stanza. And with a further continuation of the sentence the "mighty beauty" of the third stanza is developed into a "grandeur of so pure a gleam" that people in even the "remotest lands" will be startled when they hear "the rumour of your name." The whole fourth stanza works up to the magnificent finale in which the poet uses elements out of the history of the early Portuguese navigators round the Cape of Good Hope who saw the "new stars" rising out of the uncharted southern seas with their dangerous rocks and storms. That these "new stars"—"new" because up to this point in time they still belonged to a part of the world which was unknown to Western man—look like "flowers," is a indication of the clear skies of the southern hemisphere.

When reading this magnificent poem one asks oneself whether Van Wyk Louw gives any specific identity to the "wide and woeful land" of which he speaks. Does he refer to the whole of South Africa or merely a part of this vast country which he knew personally the best? When one reads in the third stanza about "hail-white" summer clouds, one thinks in the first place of the Transvaal and the Free State, the northern parts with their summer rainfall, especially the Free State which was historically the scene of "the far-off death upon the veld." If however one reads further in the third stanza of the "hail-white thunderheads that bloom / above your mountains' darkest stance," Transvaal and the Free State, which are for the largest parts areas without mountains, are cancelled out and one thinks rather of the eastern province of Natal with its mighty Drakensberg mountains. The image of the early navigators reminds one of the southern Cape Peninsula which rises out of the foaming sea. Perhaps it was Van Wyk Louw's

idea in his poem to suggest points of contact with all these different parts. The “wide and woeful land” is therefore the whole of South Africa, not only those regions to which the people of the Great Trek continued their journey.

3

If one compares Opperman’s poetry with that of an immediate predecessor like Van Wyk Louw, one immediately becomes aware of a poet who deliberately challenges the literary tradition, notably in the way the wider background of the country’s history and bygone periods play a part in his work. While especially Van Wyk Louw’s earlier volumes of poetry included somewhat melodious, rhythmic verse cadences, Opperman’s rhythms from the start were much more abbreviated and sharp-edged. Unlike the aestheticising, and rarifying use of words in the thirties, his poetry represents a radical break with the “beautiful” word, in that the poems are shorn of all decorative elements. In his work words are used soberly and economically and their latent meanings are freshly roused into consciousness. One sees it in the use of formulae and the reticence of the poetry, the employment of the short-circuiting metaphor and the dramatic build-up of the poem on different levels or layers of meaning.

This is the case in his second volume of poetry, *Negester oor Ninevé* [*Nine-star over Nineveh*] which was published in 1947. “Nagwaak by die ou man” [“Watching—literally ‘night vigil’ (JCK)—by the Old Man” translated by William and Jean Branford] has the illness and death of Opperman’s paternal grandfather because of a stroke as the autobiographical point of departure. However, although part of the poem might be grounded in personal experience, he succeeds—as in his other major poems—in transcending the particular and the autobiographical and injecting the concrete with a spiritual element. In Opperman’s poetry personal experience is completely transformed and the details of the South African landscape become symbols, while the Afrikaner or the South African expands to being a Westerner and eventually a human being in the light of eternity, although his poetry is completely earthly and attached to the realities of his South African background.

“Watching by the Old Man” begins with an almost primordial “desolate” vision as an introduction to the description of the dying man:

The wind blows where a sleek, wet otter leaves
 the pool, and in the tussocks sniffs and grieves;
 out of night’s caves, an even, whistling breeze
 circles the house among the wattle trees.
 Under the roof-beams, by the ashen wall,
 a single candle-flame burns still and small,

over his body paralysed: a moon
above a reef with bones of schooners strewn,
where stirring ocean currents carry far
from windswept cape the shattered rib and spar.

(Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

At the beginning of the poem the primordial setting of the first three lines is being related to earlier forms of animal and plant life, the remains of a pioneering life, and therefore also with the first stages of the evolutionary process. In contrast to this primordial setting the wattle trees arise as protection around the house and the attention of the reader is drawn to the room in which the dying man lies with his paralysed body. The poem therefore shows a dramatic progression from the wind and caves which are inhabited by the otters to the wattle trees, the house, the room and the concentration on the dying man. The dying man is compared to “a single candle-flame,” while the stricken body is seen as pieces of a ship which is wrecked by a typhoon against the rocks. In the past both these images—the candle and the ship—served in many poems as indications of the end of human life. Opperman however transforms the conventional notion of the ship of life into something startlingly new. In the last two lines of the first stanza he links the images of the sinking ship to the grim early history of the numerous wrecks off the coast of the Cape of Good Hope during the period of the Portuguese voyages of discovery and the Dutch trade with the East.

This historical dimension is strengthened in the second stanza by the reference to a pioneering existence in a wild, untamed country, a struggle which the narrator as descendant of the dying old man must continue:

A thong slung from the rafters overhead
supports his arm; upon the wall is spread
a python's skin among the mounted horns
of eland, bushbuck, kudu, from the thorns:
karosses on the floor. Upon me turn
from yellowed portraits on the wall, the stern
ancestral eyes. Their lights must not expire
in me, but in my blood and loins the fire
that burnt in them must still, as they designed,
fight on against the leopard and the wind. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

The historical dimension of the first stanza is expanded further in the second stanza when he evokes the earlier pioneer life in an untamed South Africa, with references to hunting and the “yellowed portraits” of the stern ancestors. The way of life which they developed, must not—as is literally stated in the Afrikaans original—come to an end in the speaker's blood or loins, but must be continued by him as their descendant. Tiger and wind now become symbols of the speaker's own struggle.

The “blood and loins” of the second stanza lead in the third stanza to the vision of the descendants round the bed of the dying man:

Strange that all here tonight from him alone,
 seeds of a single thistle-sheath, have blown:
 one who builds yellow cities, but must feel
 his own pain in the small voice of the steel
 on brick; the young mine-captain bound
 mole-like to labour fathoms underground;
 the judge who daily arbitrates the right,
 but passes sentence on himself at night;
 scattered at other times, tonight keep faith
 in the reunion of the primal sheath. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

Although these children—the bricklayer, the mine-captain and the judge—lead their own lives and are to a certain degree removed and estranged from one another, their gathering round the bed makes them aware of their relation and kinship.

Alluding to dying and the cycle of the generations, a god-like voice orders the speaker in the fourth stanza to give birth to the creation and to God:

Now hills and stars fall into him like rain,
 and beard and eyes are reed and pool again;
 in him appears to you the first profound
 marsh whence you fought and groped to higher ground:
 all things about you rise in a new form,
 the mountains, constellations and the storm,
 but all to fall again: you must give birth
 to the linked pools, the mountains, seas and earth,
 and so to Me: I, the Creation, rule
 the womb in travail and the sunlit pool! (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

The stanza begins with the beautiful image of the dying man who is falling back into a former way of existence in the evolutionary process. The mountains and stars disappear before his gaze and beard and eyes change to their evolutionary previous stage as “reed and pool.” Out of this pool, this primordial waters, the descendant is also generated and his task is to fight, to continue the struggle like his father before him. This leads him to question his own existence:

Was I this morning by the stream indeed,
 bright crystal or the stirring water-weed,
 the eyelet of a cave? As hammerhead
 I watch all day the muddy river bed;
 at night, a prisoner in every creature
 and element of ever-changing nature,
 that, dreaming, from the primal pool you send
 through rock and fern to a far-distant end. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

In stanza 5 the speaker becomes aware of the different phases which constitute his being. He relives the previous inorganic, organic and animal phases by means of a process of identification with each stage of the evolution. Since "this morning," the relatively short period of human existence on earth, he was in one or other stage, through the process of evolution, a part of everything in the universe, rising from the "primal pool" to his eventual human condition ("a far-distant end").

The awareness of the eternal metamorphoses develops into an identity crisis when the speaker sees himself as "seven selves in one," an oblique reference to the generations of the Opperman family in South Africa of which the poet represents, according to himself, the seventh stage. Although he can never decide about things with certainty, he is nevertheless aware of a certain connexion with the past, with the ancestors who appear from time to time as ghostly pioneers on their white horses:

I that can hold no purpose once begun
with certainty: I, seven selves in one,
thorn tree in darkness; on the market square,
in every common fixity aware
of seven shadows; sensing in the night
ancestral faces at the verge of sight,
ambushed forever in me, avatars
co-varying in thought with seven stars.

When the descending moon silvers the near
ridges before them, they appear
on their white stallions on the pass and scan
the hinterlands of individual man;
for ancient fighters all are worn away,
like snake skins cast off on a summer's day,
by the year's passion: only some at night
linger as shadows in the moon's last light. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)

After this uncertainty about his own identity the speaker reaches the conclusion in the cyclical final stanza in which elements from the first stanza reappear in an altered form:

But wind will blow, the gleaming otter leave
the pool, and by the tussocks sniff and grieve,
the lamp, the traveller's moon, will burn by me –
a schooner's wreckage in a stormy sea –
and, sprung from me, a youth upon the strand
confronts the forests of a new-found land,
where still the lightning plays, the winds still blow,
settle the leopard's fate, but still will know,

like his rough-bearded forebears, gazing rapt,
 the regions of the soul remain unmapped. (Grové and Harvey 1962: 229)
 With the repetition of elements from the first stanza the cycle of birth and death is made structurally apparent and the speaker comes to the realization that he too eventually will die. The youth who comes after him, will find himself anew in pioneer circumstances before “the forests of a new-found land” which in a different way are just as inhospitable as those of his ancestors before him.

4

Like Van Wyk Louw in “O Wide and Woeful Land” Opperman demonstrates in “Watching by the Old Man” —besides his ability to telescope a variety of data into a single whole—to what a high degree he was in a position to “think” in terms of Africa-images and to make the geography and history of this continent subservient to a greater purpose.

This is also the case in the work of later poets like Breyten Breytenbach and Wilma Stockenström whose work is worthwhile reading and studying. In my lecture today I have concentrated on two poems which I consider masterpieces of Afrikaans poetry. I must remind you again, as I have said before, that even the best translation of a poem is but a meagre, skinny representation of the original. If, however, I have stimulated you today to read more Afrikaans poetry in the original or in translation, my visit to Poznań and my lecture here would have been worthwhile.

Bibliography

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