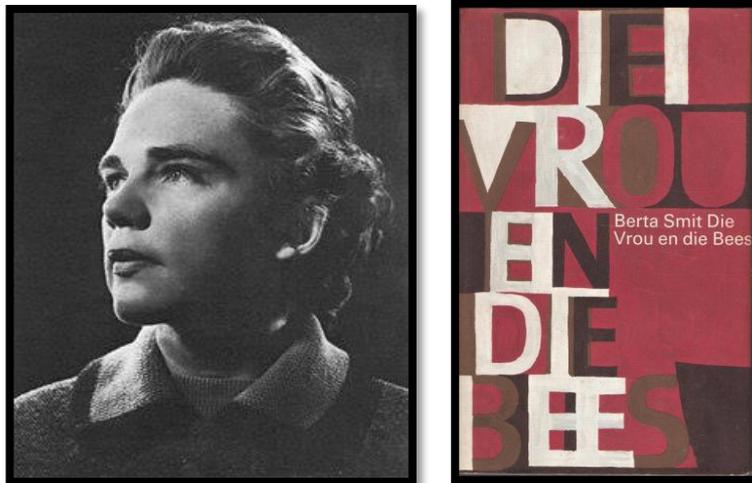


Refractions of Ingrid in novels by Berta Smit and Karel Schoeman

Lesley Marx, July 2019

Die Vrou en die bees (1964), Berta Smit



Berta Smit was not a prolific writer, but she was an extremely interesting one. When Ingrid Jonker started working as a secretary for Citadel press in 1954, Berta became an early friend. She edited the *Naweekpos*, devoted to a range of subjects intended for weekend reading. Petrovna Metelerkamp writes that she was notable for her dark sense of humour, her wide reading, especially in German, and her knowledge of Calvin (2018: 75-6). In later years, Berta confirmed that there are echoes of Ingrid in her first novel, *Die vrou en die bees*: “As persoon het sy my ‘literêr’ gestimuleer,” she writes to Johan van Wyk in 1985 (Metelerkamp, 2018: 77). Berta Smit’s interview with L.M. van der Merwe (2006: 112-130) is absorbing for what it suggests of herself as well as her views on Ingrid and their friendship, which faded during Ingrid’s last years.

In the interview, Berta, somewhat to van der Merwe’s disappointment it seems, is cautious, careful, guarded in her descriptions. She thinks before she answers questions and quietly appears to accept much of van der Merwe’s theorising about Ingrid’s psychological and emotional world. The glimpses we get of Ingrid conjure a needy young woman, desperate and warmly grateful for kindness. Berta’s own view is that one can help another person towards their own independence but not take on the role of permanent crutch (115). Ingrid was also, however, a lively, laughing friend who wrote constantly—leaving little greetings or brief messages or fragments of new poems on Berta’s desk. The best of their friendship lay in their shared love of literature: “...ons het tog dieselfde taal gepraat” (119). At one point,

discussing Ingrid's feelings about religion, Berta recalls the first lines of a poem Ingrid sent to her (and that was published in *Die Huisgenoot* in 1956): "*Roep die rooidag môrekoffie en ek roep: gee lig, o God!*" (122; Jonker, *Versamelde Werke*, 158). The poem expresses spiritual need and questing, but also alienation from, and contempt for, the conventional forms of religion. Later in the interview, Berta confesses to having destroyed all the letters she received from Ingrid, including those that contained poems. With hindsight, this seems an extraordinary confession. She cannot recall why she did this, and tries to remember lines of a poem that was not published and that Ingrid declared, in her letter, was all she was capable of at the time: "*Ek sing 'n liedjie soos ek stap, ek sing dit oor en oor. Ek het jou nooit besit nie en ek kan jou nooit verloor.*" Berta adds, "...dit is al een wat ek nou kan onthou. Ek moet vir u sê ek was op 'n tyd so...ek bêre nie graag goed nie. Ek het baie dinge vernietig waaroor ek jammer is" (129). This confession comes right at the end of the interview. Earlier she tells van der Merwe how she spoke to a psychiatrist who had seen Ingrid at some point before she died. Berta's expression becomes noticeably more broken as she talks of how little she saw of Ingrid at that time: "Dis nou nie omdat ek haar nie wou sien nie, maar my omstandighede was so dat ek nie... Jy kon eintlik niks aan haar doen nie; jy moes eintlik sien hoe sy afgetakel raak. 'n Psigiater-vriend van my het nà haar dood vir my gesê: 'Dis onnodig om jou te verwyf. Niemand kon iets aan Ingrid doen nie.'" A few moments later, she repeats, "Maar hy het gesê 'n mens kon niks vir Ingrid doen nie....Hy het nie haar geval vir my uitgelê nie, maar dit onthou ek wel, dat hy gesê het dit help nie 'n mens het 'n gewete daaroor nie, want dis amper—ek glo nou nie in die noodlot nie, maar soos...". Van der Merwe tries to finish her thought, suggesting all one could do is delay the evil day (116). The subtext here is intriguing, raising questions about Berta's own difficulties—we know she was beset by serious health problems and died of a brain haemorrhage at the age of 70 (Terblanche, *Litnet*), but she also seems to have been haunted by Ingrid's death and feelings of anguish and guilt, especially given her ambivalent response to Ingrid: affection mixed with irritation and exhaustion at Ingrid's persistent neediness (115).

Berta's strong religious sensibilities play a significant role in her conjuring of Ingrid in *Die vrou en die bees*, and she recalls, in the interview, Ingrid's own religious yearnings. She notes Ingrid's view that the Lord's Prayer must have been incorrectly translated, for how could the Lord lead anyone into temptation? Ingrid also flirted with Roman Catholicism and carried a rosary in her handbag (120). Berta observes: "Sy het uit die aard van die saak 'n baie sterk religieuse aanvoeling gehad—ek dink nie 'n mens kan 'n digter wees daarsonder nie—maar nou nie 'n kerklike aanvoeling nie. En ja, tog, sy't haar vreeslik teen die dogma uitgelaat" (121). She adds that Ingrid's religious feelings were "'n soort literêre waarneming van dinge'" (122), as well as an aspect of her continued quest: "...daar is vir my 'n soort nostalgie, 'n heimwee, 'n iets wat ontbreek, wat in haar gedigte ook baie sterk uitkom" and comments on how she, herself "'n vreeslike hervormer," tried to steer Ingrid back onto a more conventional religious path, although her apparent failure to do so did not affect her view that "daar was by haar 'n behoefte aan die geestelike" (122).

What is clear in this interview is Berta Smit's imaginative engagement with religious matters. The daughter of the school principal in Hopefield and a mother who who wrote, she was steeped in literature as well as the ties of a strong church-going Christian family. Her first novel, *Die vrou en die bees* (1964) straddles these worlds of literature and religion, and, also, reveals the impetus towards experiment with non-realist narrative that marks such better-known novels of "Die Sestigters" as Etienne Leroux's daring *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1962) or Chris Barnard's unsettling stories in *Duiwel-in-die-bos* (1968). The prose is crisp

and clear, yet richly suggestive—no surprise, perhaps, that Berta Smit turned to Marguerite Duras whenever she needed inspiration to continue her writing (Terblanche, Litnet).

Die vrou en die bees is an intriguing latter-day riff on *The Pilgrim's Progress* under the signs of the existential vision of 'terrible freedom' and the absurdist sense of one's alienation in a meaningless world. The names of the obviously allegorical figures and places in the novel are spelt with capital letters. Maria is a maths teacher who, one day, encounters a Man in her flat who offers her an undefined assignment at the Publishing House (die Uitegewery). She will need to resign from her job and enter the Publishing House on trust. Although she will not discuss her decision with her flatmate, Julia, the Man tells her that everything concerns Julia ("alles gaan om Julia"). Arriving at the Publishing House, Maria meets the Dominee and is given a desk whereon lies a manuscript, "Die Werk van die Heilige Gees" (40). She also meets the Typist (die Tikster) who introduces her to the Club (die Klub) via a secret green door that only she seems to know about (89), reminiscent of all those entry points into fantastic worlds, be it the wardrobe in the Narnia stories, the mirror in *Phantastes*, the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* or Platform 9 ³/₄ at King's Cross Railway Station. The Club is a strange and sinister place where people sit at tables alone talking to themselves in mirrors and musicians perform regardless of their having no audience. Sexual identities also seem to be fluid. Maria and the Typist both make narrow escapes, while Julia disappears into a Grey Mercedes and the parallel universe of the Club, accompanied by its ominous Director (die Bestuurder). Maria's final assignment is to find the Typist who seems to have gone missing. At the moment of Julia's disappearance, the Typist appears and Maria wonders about the coincidence in one of the typographical breaks used by Smit to signal Maria's interiority:

alles gaan om Julia
ek het 'n kaart van die middestad in my sak en die opdrag om die Tikster te soek
miskien is die twee dinge dieselfde en kan ons net nog nie die verband sien nie? (163)

At one level, Maria's question is part of an ongoing meditation on whether the world turns on predetermined order or is merely a random assortment of events. At another level, suggesting a troubling order of repetition, is the series of moments that increase our sense of the shared worlds and identities of Maria, Julia and the Typist. In terms of the plot, Julia's disappearance gives way to the Typist who replaces her as Maria's flatmate: that may be read as the triumph of Good over Evil, the Publishing House over the Club. And yet, the most disturbing moments in the novel are those that suggest the porous nature of the three women, a porousness dramatised by the story of an ox that assaults a woman: the story is a memory for Maria as well as a biographical fact for the Typist: the event led to the Typist's mother's miscarriage and institutionalisation in an asylum. So, too, Julia's mother was institutionalised and Maria's mother could have no more children after she was born. Hovering over these revelations is the character of Mrs Coward, Maria's neighbour whose childlessness is an ongoing source of grief.

The only attempt at a sustained discussion of *Die vrou en die bees* that I could find was by E.A. van der Elst entitled "Die godsdiensgegewe in twee romans van Berta Smit" and driven unambiguously by a determination to read the novel as simplistic religious allegory. Thus, we are told of the theme of the novel:

In hierdie werk gaan dit om die Christen wat sy Goddelike opdrag van liefde tot die naaste moet uitvoer. Die kern van die roman is dus die liefdesgebod, al word dit nie eksplisiet gesê nie. Die onsekerheid en die vrees wat die Christen dikwels ervaar by die uitvoering

van hierdie opdrag, word in die hooffiguur, Maria vergestalt. Die liefde tot die naaste, 'n sosiale verhouding, word bepaal deur die wonderbare werking van die Heilige Gees in Maria en deur haar verhouding tot die Christus-figuur. So is die sosiale verhouding 'n uitvloeisel van die religieuse. (19)

Everything follows neatly from the above assumption and the essay is broken down into what “die Man” (Christ) “die Uitegewery” (the Church), “die Klub” (the evil antithesis of the Church) and the rest of the episodes and characters represent as waystations on Maria’s religious pilgrimage from risky encounters with Evil to redemption and Goodness. The *bees* (the literal translation is “ox,” although “beast” easily comes to mind) is unequivocally associated with evil: “Soos in die Bybelboek is die vrou in die roman simbool van die Christendom, en die bees beeld van die Satan of die Bose, wat in allerlei vorms in Berta Smit se roman gestalt kry” (20). The wordplay is obviously irresistible in this reading: “die Bose oftewel die bees” (30).

My approach focuses on the ambiguities of the novel and its three lead women characters. Early on in the novel, Julia alerts Maria to the visitor, the Man waiting for her in her flat, with his dualistic image: Maria pauses before responding to the invitation from the Man whose “opdrag” to her is to help in unspecified ways at the “Uitegewery.” His own doubleness is disquieting: it may be read in Christological terms, but there are disturbances. His “oë van die heilige/mond van die aarde” (11) suggest an ascetic gaze countered by his rich red lips (10), prefiguring Julia’s red tongue (30), while the blood that pulses visibly through his long, thin veined hands looks forward to a later description of him with a red mark on his forehead, flaming against the sun—is it the wound of the crown of thorns or the mark of the beast? And in this story, what does the beast represent? The blood also prefigures the vampiric moment when Julia scratches her brother’s neck and licks the blood off her fingers (127-28). This, ambiguous, subliminal bond between Maria, Julia and the Man is seen in the moment, too, when the Man assures Maria, in the refrain: “Onthou, alles gaan om Julia” (58). A typographic break follows signifying Maria’s point of view:

twee gesigte en die wete van bloed
en alles gaan om Julia (59)

As Maria ponders her response to the assignment that the Man offers her, she recalls:

—op die plaas was daar 'n groot, swart bees. eers was hy so mak en rustig. die kinders het met hom gespeel toe hy 'n oulike kalfie was. hulle het op sy rug gery en hy het sy kop skeef gehou dat hulle agter sy ore kan krap. hy het sulke sagte, bruin oë gehad. maar toe op 'n dag het hy skielik wild en wreed geword. met 'n gesnork het hy op 'n vrou afgestorm. hy het haar teen 'n muur vasgedruk. ek het self gesien hoe haar bloed teen die muur spat.

Sy lek oor haar lippe. Dit voel droog and skurwering onder haar tong. (13)

The dryness of her mouth suggests the tension produced by the traumatic memory, while the gesture of licking her lips also conjures up the image of Julia described above. Maria’s identity seems to be fluid.

Sensing that the Man is leaving her free to make a decision, she finds it to be “'n verskriklike vryheid” (14). We cross-cut to a scene in the street of a grey Mercedes running over and killing a small dog; another car drives over the small dog and its insides are forced onto the

street. We cross back to Maria who makes her decision to accept the assignment. The shocking physical violence perpetrated on the small dog (and the reader), a helpless victim, foregrounds the fear that frames Maria's decision to accept the assignment and haunts the narrative that follows, including moments of anxiety as she wonders about the nature of choice:

wil of moet?

Die twee meng met mekaar en word in mekaar opgelos. (86)

The issue of 'terrible freedom'—and the possibility that there is no freedom, only endless repetition of a design beyond human control—subtends both the mystery of the mirror figures of Julia/the Typist and the miming of Maria by Julia as she licks her lips. All three may be seen as versions of a woman in confrontation with a travesty of freedom under the sign of patriarchal religious structures. More broadly, 'terrible freedom' speaks to the existential angst that pervaded the post-war world as conventional consolations—religious, social, political—began to erode. This erosion is clearly marked by the Kafkaesque quality of Maria's first destabilising encounter with the Man and the inexplicable, absurdist nature of her quest throughout the novel. (There is, of course, a philosophical trajectory from Kafka through Camus).

The *bees* of the title is not just part of Maria's memory, but is a key image in the explicit use to which Ingrid Jonker's biography is put. Firstly, we find out from Maria's neighbour, the anguished, childless Mrs Coward, that Julia's mother was committed to a psychiatric institution and died several years later. She continues:

Eintlik het sy dus nooit 'n moeder geken nie. Jy kan dus besef met watter weerloosheid die arme kind grootgeword het. Van haar moeder het sy nog boonop 'n baie sensitiewe, gespanne geaardheid geërf. En vir so 'n kind om nou van aangesig tot aangesig met die dood te kom...." (68)

The immediate context for Mrs Coward's revelation is the ambiguity regarding a young woman who has just drowned in the sea—seen by Julia—but whether by accident or suicide remains unclear (61, 68-69). (Published the year before Ingrid's death, this plot point is disturbing and uncanny).

Towards the end of the novel the strange correspondences between Julia and the Typist (and, indeed, Maria, who first recalls seeing the terrible event) is confirmed when the story of the beast/*bees*/ox is given a fuller iteration and brings a mother's madness together with shattered pregnancy. The Typist tells it as her own story: her mother was committed to an institution as a result of a nervous collapse occasioned by being attacked by an ox when she was pregnant with her third child. She miscarried. If "*bees*" translates as ox, then it is a castrated bull, linking the image of infertility, or miscarriage in this case or, indeed, abortion, as Ingrid herself suffered, to the childlessness of Mrs Coward (and we have also been told by Maria that her mother could have no more children after her birth [127]). For the Typist, the terrible event is fraught more especially with the question of whether the shock of the attack produced her mother's madness, or whether it was merely the catalyst for a latent madness to manifest itself.¹

Furthermore, the novel's earlier account of the attack of the "*bees*" noted that the animal had been gentle when still a calf and had only later become wild. After describing the attack on

her mother, the Typist tells of how her little brother stormed out to try and kill the marauding animal:

Maar toe hy by die bees kom, was die dier weer heeltemal sag en bedoord. Hy het na my broer toe gekom en sy kop skeef gehou sodat hy agter sy ore kon krap soos ons altyd gedoen het. Maar my broer het hom oor sy kop geslaan en geslaan. Die houe het nie veel uitwerking gehad nie en die bees het net met sulke groot, treurige oë na hom gekyk en weggedraai. En toe het hy gehuil, vreeslik gehuil sodat ons hom glad nie tot bedaring kon bring nie. Hy het net aanmekeer geskree dat hy nooit daardie oë sal vergeet nie. (179-80)

The Typist's dismay at her brother finally taking the side of "*die bees/die Bose*" is countered by Mrs Coward who suggests that the brother became a doctor, a healer, as a result of his failure as a child to protect his mother and that his good deeds extend into the world (181).ⁱⁱ Through these shifts, the purpose of the ox becomes unstable in its meanings. The Typist's brother eventually leaves to become a doctor, possibly the same doctor whom we meet earlier as Julia's brother whose neck she scratches until it bleeds (127-28). There are, thus, labyrinthine mirrorings as characters echo and repeat each other, effectively refusing straightforward moral classifications.

The Kafkaesque power of the writing in this slim volume draws on the traditions of the fantastic, a form of imagining that constantly breaks down boundaries, borders, polarities. Smit is especially adept at the gothic and grotesque articulations of the fantastic. The carnival of mirrors and the shifting sexual identities in the dangerous, seductive, nightmare world of the Club, for example, are a counterpoint to the absurd and gruesome comedy of the dinner party at the Cowards—Mr Coward is dead, but his corpse is treated with reverence by the guests as they compete to feed him and attend to his needs (except for Maria, who commits the unpardonable sin of recognising and announcing, with hard-nosed realism, that he is dead): "Op 'n wenk van die gasvrou buig almal hul koppe en begin eet. Die dooie man eet met wit, gulsige lippe en kan nie genoeg kry nie" (133). We are also treated to a meticulously detailed account of the menu of soup with beets, celery, cabbage, parsley, marjoram and fennel; and a dessert of toast with peaches and cheese sauce (132-37). The ambiguity of the last supper of fish and loaves attended by Maria and the Typist looks back to Mrs Coward's dinner party with its parodic environmental and theological concerns. So, for example, in "Last Supper" scene, the fish are described: "vis wat in die groen see geswem het, vis met die silwer skubbe silwer in die sonskyn, met glasige oë nou dood in die skottel en ryk aan voedingskrag, voed die mense wat wag om die tafel...lewe uit dood" (170). The typography indicates that these are Maria's thoughts and clearly recall Mrs Coward's dinner where the debate about vegetarian food and the horror of feeding off life (135) is offset by, nevertheless, feeding the dead Mr Coward. So the gothic tendency to dissolve boundaries, here between life and death, is suggested. The scene is also replete with shades of Buñuel and Fellini at their most carnivalesque and thus proposes further ways in which the novel's grim comedy resists simplistic allegorical readings.

Berta Smit's novel engages with violence and unnerving juxtapositions to challenge the reader with a vision of Christian redemption that is far from soothing or sentimental. The reader is required to work hard to grasp the complexity of her vision of a Christian pilgrimage that is fraught with absurdity, irony and meanings that slip and slide. Of a piece with the complex overdubbed echoes of Ingrid in the novel, is the rich and frequently disturbing way in which she explores religious faith, moral clarity, the relationship of self to self, self to other, self to the divine and, above all, the puzzle of how freedom, agency and

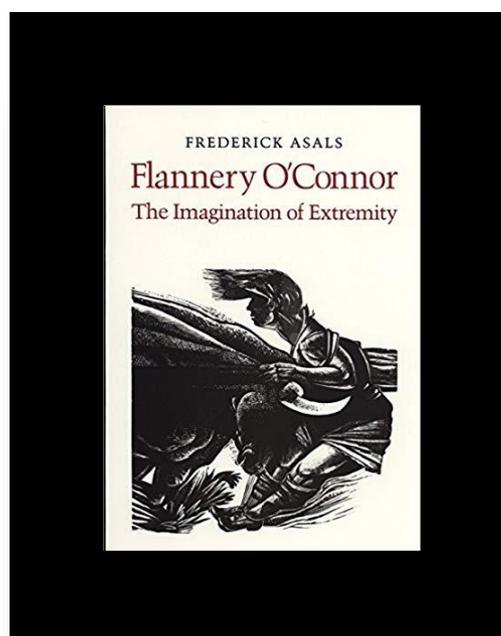
destiny interact. As Audrey Blignaut argued, “Om iets in die letterkunde te vind waarby dit aansluit, sou ’n mens na die simboliese verhale van die Duitse skrywer Franz Kafka moet gaan—daardie vreemde, aangrypende verhale waarin die skrywer, soos in ’n gefolterde droom, worstel met die belewenis van die mens se verlatenheid in ’n paradoksale en problematiese wêreld en sy ewig onblusbare verlange na God.” Blignaut pays special attention to the events in the Club, where “[d]ie makabere vindingrykheid en die grieselige, oplaaiende spanning waarmee Maria se besoek... beskryf word, is die oortuigendste bewys in dié boek van Berta Smit se vermoë as skryfster.” And furthermore,

...die vorm wat die verhaal aanneem, is veel meer die beklemmende en bevreemdende aaneenskakeling van episodes uit ’n droom. Op dié manier word die fantastiese dan ter sake gemaak.

Hulle is tonele uit ’n klein drama wat gemaskerd gespeel word—’n klemmende veruiterlikte voorstelling van ’n innerlike werklikheid waarin ’n mens poog om aan die Christelike opdrag te voldoen, maar waar sy weg deurkruis word met pynigende, soms spookagtige beelde van belewenisse wat die opdrag verduister en die mens vreemd stel teenoor sy eie bestaan (in Erika Terblanche, Litnet).

The novel asks questions. It does not pose simple answers. Do we have free will or is all predestined? “Die dag het hierheen gelei/of ek die dag?” (90) asks Maria in one of her interior moments as she follows the Typist into the Club. Did the drowned woman choose her fate? Or, as in Thomas Hardy’s bleakest moments, perhaps character *is* fate.ⁱⁱⁱ There are two moments in Berta Smit’s novel that stress the value of refusing closure: when Maria arrives at the Publishing House, she tells the Dominee that she is a maths teacher trained to solve problems. The Dominee replies thoughtfully, “’n Probleem wat opgelos kan word, is geen probleem nie” (38). Later, at the symbolic supper of fish and loaves (but symbolic in what ways?), he responds to Maria’s observation that she has still not found out why she came to the Publishing House: “Hoe bly is ek, my kind...dat ek geen antwoord op jou vraag het nie. Die vraagteken moet dus bly....Ek bring hulde aan die vraagteken” (171). As Iris DeMent would sing, in another register, but on the same subject, “I think I’ll just let the mystery be.” This openness is reflected in Metelerkamp’s prefatory remarks to her recent biography when she quotes Jan Rabie on the subject of trying to fathom Ingrid: “Wees dankbaar as daar ’n onbekendheid, ’n onvoltooidheid, onsekerheid is—’n droom. Daar is misterie in haar” (2018: 10).

Thoughts on women and animals in Smit, Jonker and O' Connor



The ambiguities that I explored in *Die vrou en die bees* are present in two short stories that tantalisingly rehearse the pattern of a woman's encounter with a version of the *bees*: Ingrid Jonker's own short story, "Die bok," published in 1961, and Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf," published in 1956.

The Goat: Sex as gift and curse

"Die bok" was inspired by a story told to Jonker by her friend, Elmie Watson, about a goat that seemed to want to attack her pregnant mother. Watson recalls how "wasig" Ingrid's eyes looked as she listened and then she wrote the story, making "a sort of sexual thing out of it" (Metelerkamp 2018: 159). "Die bok" tells of Susan, transplanted from the city to the country by her marriage to Hein who is much older than her and who spends much of his time away from her with the fishermen. She is pregnant, disenchanted with her husband (whose physical attributes, such as his "wit spitsbaardjie" [182] are those of Piet Venter, Ingrid's luckless husband), and finds pleasure only in her roses. The key disturbances in her world are the two coloured workers, Lena and Jager—whose sexuality reproves her own alienation from her husband—and the appearance of a goat who emerges out of the morning mist and gazes at her, challenging her, provoking in her the desire to kill him, but also unsettling her in ways that are implicitly sexual and linked, ironically, to her husband (Jager will make the connection at the end of the story). Yet, the connection of the goat to her husband also partakes of Susan's awareness of the child growing within her and her discovery of her love for working with the soil: "Onder haar hart roer en beur die kind. Sy hurk gemaklik tussen die roosbome. Die son op haar blote kop en die geur van die bloeisels het haar lomerig gemaak" (185). She feels the blood rising to her cheeks and becomes aware of a musty smell: "Toe sy omkyk, staan die bok agter haar. Terwyl sy haastig orent kom, knoop sy haar bloes

voor toe, sonder om haar oë van hom af te neem. Hy maak 'n paar passies asof hy haar nooi om te kom saamspeel, dan krap hy ritmies met sy voorpoot op die grond” (185). She threatens the goat, “[m]aar hy staan nader, stoot sy tong klapperend in en uit sy bek, half speels, half brutaal” (185). Susan grabs hold of him, forcing a short falsetto note out of his throat. Later, she will see the goat quietly eating the rosebuds: “Daardie rose sal nooit weer bloei nie, nie nadat 'n bok hulle afgevreet het nie, sê die geloof” (187). The story reaches its climax in her final confrontation with the goat, now tied to the rooikrans tree. She finally uses her knife to cut the animal loose and walks slowly back to the house aware of her unborn child, her sleeping husband and the roses that will never bloom again, a very delicately achieved final paragraph that brings together tentative promise with incipient despair.

The story offers a finely honed exploration of the complex state of mind of the pregnant woman, closed off in a world that her husband cannot apprehend, profoundly connected to her unborn child and the earthy sensuality of her own fertile body, anxious about the concomitant fragility of her state, and projecting onto the goat both her fear and her desire (the woman also projects these conflicting emotions onto Lena and Jager, imbricated here with racial anxiety).

It may not be too far-fetched to argue that, sub-textually, the *bees* in Berta Smit's novel also acts as a terrifying and desired other onto which conflicting emotions are projected by the pregnant mother. The grotesque violence of the encounter recalls the disturbing, even lurid, images of Ingrid Jonker's remarkable poem written while she was pregnant with Simone, and, according to Metelerkamp (101-104), terrified of a miscarriage, “Swanger vrou:”

Ek lê onder die kors van die nag singend,
Opgekrul in die riool, singend,
en my nageslag lê in die water

The Bull: Sex and Spiritual Mystery

Insofar as the *bees* is also an occasion in Berta Smit's novel for revealing the complexities of religious consciousness, it bears, arguably, a family resemblance to Flannery O' Connor's reworking of the myth of Europa and the bull in the short story “Greenleaf.” Mrs May's husband dies and leaves her only the farm, forcing her from her home in the city to set up as a dairy farmer. Her two grown sons are abusive parasites. Her will to order her world, through rigid control (she carries a stick), class prejudice and bourgeois values is severely challenged by her tenants, Mr and Mrs Greenleaf. They are fecund with five daughters, two sons, cultivated French Catholic daughters-in-law and several grandchildren. Their dairy farming is becoming very successful, but most disconcerting is Mrs Greenleaf who devotes much of her time to what she calls “prayer healing”: she cuts out newspaper stories about human suffering, buries them in the woods and then lies across them to pray over them. When Mrs May comes across her calling out “Jesus, Jesus,” she is astounded and raises her stick, believing as she does that “the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom” (a curious conflation of the sexual and the religious). The narrator adds that Mrs May “was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (316). Mrs Greenleaf, “waving her aside,” continues her ritual: “ ‘O Jesus, stab me in the heart!’ Mrs Greenleaf shrieked. ‘Jesus, stab me in the heart!’ and she fell back in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms

spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth” (317).

It is Mrs May who will, climactically, be stabbed in what Richard Giannone argues is O’Connor’s expression of “desert spirituality,” derived from the hermit desert fathers: “Mrs. Greenleaf’s form of prayer brings the modern reader close to the eremitic experience of *catanyxis* or sudden shock that puts a new feeling in the soul and to a stark recognition of *penthos*, the tears that flow from the inner shock” (334). It is for Mrs May to experience the stabbing, the piercing, the tears that will signal her apocalyptic entry into a state of grace. Thus, when she enters the Greenleaf milking parlor to “see if they kept it clean” she is blinded by the “spotless white concrete room... filled with sunlight.” Significantly, “[t]he light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain” (325).

The prime mover in Mrs May’s journey towards a violent redemption is the Greenleaf’s bull that has invaded her field and browses amongst her milk herd. Indeed, the story begins with a description of the bull “silvered in the moonlight, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room” (311). She dreams that something is chewing the walls of her house, awakens and sees the bull outside her window “chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor” (312). Throughout the story, she insists that Mr Greenleaf move the bull out of her field and finally demands that he drive with her to the field and shoot it. Mr Greenleaf exits the car with his gun and follows the bull into the woods, while Mrs May waits, sitting on the bumper of the car, feeling very tired as the “white light” of the sun forces her to close her eyes, echoing her dream the night before as the sun, “a swollen red ball... began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet” (329). Suddenly the bull appears, “crossing the pasture toward her at a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again.” She stares “in a freezing unbelief... and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip.” Mrs May has the “look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (333). When Mr Greenleaf finally arrives and shoots the bull, Mrs May “seemed to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (334). This catastrophic ending (or perhaps ‘eucatastrophic’ ending, to appropriate Tolkien’s term) is also a beginning of mystery for Mrs May who is both horribly punished and unspeakably blessed (what is she whispering?) in O’Connor’s dramatisation of *catanyxis*.

This is obviously not merely an escaped bull chewing grass and feeding with the herd of cows, a bull goaded into rage by the honking of her car horn. Nor is the story simply an eccentric channeling of classical mythology where Zeus, god of the sky, comes to rape/seduce Europa, symbol of the earth—here figured as a bitter, selfish, judgemental woman who must be forced into an awareness of her body, her vulnerability, into humility and grace. It is a brutal vision and of a piece with O’Connor’s desire to shock. As Giannone points out:

The terrible speed of God's invasion recurs so frequently in O'Connor's fiction that it ceases to surprise seasoned readers, many of whom dodge the violence through theory or some other kind of abstract explanation. But when grasped in its cruel, blood particulars, such a tormented impaling by the bull on a beautiful day on a sleepy dairy farm must shock. And it is meant to register a shock seismic on impact and glacial in reverberation. O'Connor is never satisfied merely to craft a dramatically effective comeuppance for the

protagonist. The implosion aims for *catanyxis* in the reader as well, an emotion that cuts deep enough to plant a new attitude or resolution in the unbelieving reader's heart. This is an art designed to transmit the presence of God to a hardhearted audience. (341)

Unraveling an ending

While profoundly different from each other in several respects, Berta Smit's short novel and the two short stories explored above all have in common a concern with forms of violence as they affect women, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Maria, in *Die vrou en die bees*, suffers the traumatic memory of the woman attacked by the ox. Early in the novel, she also suffers a physical wound when Julia enters her bed and ties them together with a rope, the effects of which chafe her and cause her pain and bleeding during the course of the next day. Her most terrifying experience takes place when she finds herself in the gothic labyrinth of the Club, where the Director, sinister, shifty, oleaginous, sexually ambiguous, with his white face and feverish eyes (113), tries to impose on Maria his view that the narcissistic self-centred world of the Club's inhabitants testify to the truth that "[a]lles het uit ons ontstaan. Die mens is die enigste skeppende wese in die heelal. En vir hierdie skepping moet ons verantwoordelikheid aanvaar. Sonder die mens is daar niks, niks" (106). This is one aspect of the "terrible freedom" that Maria needs to confront. Maria begins to realise the unmitigated hatred that the Director feels for any resistance and fears for her life, but escapes. The end of her journey sees her restored to a community with a new flatmate who herself felt fear for her life during her last experience in the Club. Julia, however, associated with the infliction of pain (the rope, her tongue red between her teeth, her nails on her brother's neck) disappears into the Club at the end of the novel. Her mysterious fate haunts the end of the novel, even as the Typist appears to be taking her place.

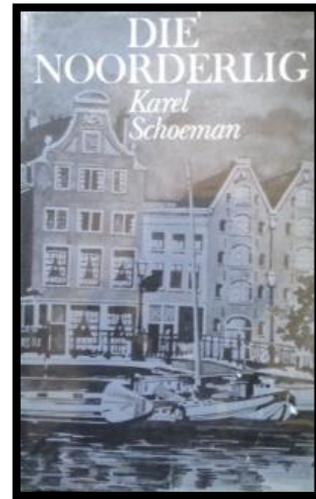
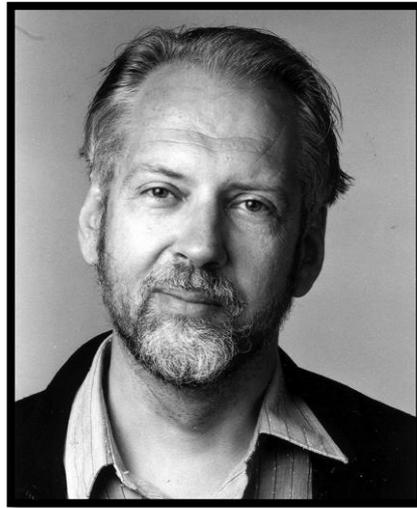
A recurrent motif of feet walking in the room above Maria's flat leads into the last few moments that speak of mental anguish (in an image that recalls the crown of thorns or Mrs May's ball of light like a bullet), the transience of human life and, at the last, in words redolent of Macbeth, the tragic acknowledgement of the futility of life:

Spykerhakke hard op die vloer.
spykers deur jou brein
Maria sê: „Kom, ek sal jou jou kamer gaan wys.”
In Julia se kamer staan die divan leeg met net 'n matras daarop. Die ingeboude kas se deure is oop en daar is niks in nie, net een skouertjie en 'n opgefrommelde buskaartjie op die grond.
„Vir vannag,” sê Maria, „sal ek jou kan leen wat jy nodig het.”
„En môre,” sê die Tikster, „sal ek my goed kan bring.”
môre en môre en môre
lewe sonder einde.

Like the end of "Die bok," there is a powerful sense of ambiguity here: the promise of renewal, tempered by sterility. Susan feels the baby move in her and yet the last sentence tells us that "Volgende somer sal daar geen rose wees nie." The ambiguity works at both physical and metaphysical levels, even as Mrs May, whose name suggests springtime and who appears to have experienced the shock of spiritual sight, must die physically in order that she may

whisper into the ear of the beast-god. In all three stories, moreover, the violence of awakening is rendered in ways that are both terrifying and erotic, of a piece, perhaps, with the philosophical view of Georges Bataille who argued that death, the erotic and the spiritual in their extreme moments partake of a continuity of being that breaks down individual separateness and melts all boundaries between self and other (be the other material or divine).

Spiraal (1968) and *Die noorderlig* (1975), Karel Schoeman



Looking back over his writing life, Karel Schoeman is quite dismissive of *Die noorderlig*. Completed shortly after his arrival in Glasgow it is, he writes,

...’n afhandeling van die Amsterdamse ervaring, meen ek, en ’n poging om my eie herinnerings te verwerk of ’n nuwe en verdere poging om daarmee af te reken. Ek glo nie dat dit ’n besonder goeie roman is nie, alhoewel ek geen behoefte voel om die indruk self te probeer bevestig nie: te veel vaagheid en ontwyking, meen ek, want wat was die hooffiguur eintlik anders as die hooffiguur in *Spiraal* so ’n vyftien of twintig jare later; met sy homoseksualiteit nog altyd maar net geïmpliseer? (2002: 459)

The tentative exploration of homosexuality in both novels is, indeed, so implicit that one may not even be aware of it unless one has read Schoeman’s account.^{iv} *Spiraal* (1968) is interesting, arguably, less for its fugitive engagement with the focalising character’s sexual identity than for the portrait it paints of Johannesburg in the sixties from the point of view of Anton, the two young women, Ingrid and Nadine, and the owner of the boarding house in which they all live, the widowed Frau Jablonska. Displaced in time and space, the widow dwells somewhere between her daily obligations to feed and tend her guests, rake the leaves in her garden, attend Mass and obsessively and yearningly recall her youth and its riches—social and material—in *mittel-Europa* before the Second World War. Like Schoeman’s other miniaturist novels of this early period, *Spiraal* is by turns austere and lyrical, here documenting the relentless monotony and loneliness of Anton’s aimless life: his room is strewn with his attempts to write; his weekends are a source of dread as he seeks ways to get through them, emerging at the other end only to sit in an office that drains him even more. There are occasional forays to parties where playing records, dancing and an excess of drink and cigarettes become tediously routine. Or he stays alone in his room, goes to sleep too early and so is unable to sleep. The descriptions of Anton’s desolation are the ones to which the older Schoeman returns, telling us that these are, effectively, autobiographical: “...hoe goed onthou ek nou nie weer die onrus en onbestemde hunkering van die tyd toe ek in die stad gewoon het nie, ses- of sewe-en-twintig jaar oud, die eensaamheid wat soos fisieke pyn kon

wees, die oombikke van pure wanhoop.” He adds, “As ek dit nie eens in ’n boek opgeteken het nie, sou ek vandag skaars nog daarvan weet” (2002: 381).

Circling around Anton’s loneliness are the three women. He listens to Frau Jablonska reminiscing or admonishing him to go out. He observes the movements of Nadine, invariably on tenterhooks waiting for Basil to hoot for her—her fate is to abort Basil’s baby and be left alone in the hospital at the end of the novel. Ingrid waits on the whims and desires of her married lover, who finally leaves her to return to his wife and children, without telling her. She is the one on whom Anton’s desires have been focussed and he has admitted that he has been in love with her, albeit without hope. Our final sight of her is in a café where she sits with Anton after Frau Jablonska has died and they contemplate the changes that will be wrought. For one thing, the old house will be torn down and flats raised, an image of ruin and rebuilding that haunts the novel and speaks to the dying of the old city to make room for the anonymous soul-less skyscrapers that will rear their monstrous heads. Ingrid looks forward:

„Dit sal alles net so weggewis, uitgewis word, die tuin en die bome en die huis, net asof dit nooit bestaan het nie, en niemand sal meer iets daarvan weet nie. Ons het in daardie huis gelewe en ons het daar musiek gemaak en gedans, en ons was daar ongelukkig gewees en ons het geëet en skottelgoed gewas. Niks bly oor nie, nè Anton?”

„Herinnerings,” sê hy.

Sy knik. „Ja, dít. En wat maak mens met hulle?”

„Jy dra hulle met jou saam, soos jy jouself saamdra, ’n deel van jou.”

„Êrens in my kamertjie of my woonstelletjie. En jy, Anton?”

„Wie weet?”

Hy steek vir hulle sigarette aan, en sy leun weer terug terwyl sy rook. „In ’n kafeetjie in Amsterdam of op ’n berg in Griekeland, wie weet, ja. Maar jy sal ook onthou.”

„Ek sal onthou.”

„En dan sal jy ons eendag almal in ’n boek sit.” (116)

He agrees, but adds that he needs to work through these times until he can write about them without ‘piety.’ Underpinning the idea of working through his experiences is also, of course, the notion of ordering them, giving shape to them through creative vision. The title of the book comes from an earlier conversation he had with Ingrid about the way in which art can protect the artist, to some extent, from brute reality.^v She asks, „Hoekom kan die lewe nie soos ’n boek wees nie?...Netjies en behoorlik georden, soos ’n ring wat sluit en ’n geheel vorm. Maar dit is nie so nie, dis nie ’n ring nie, dis ’n spiraal wat net verder slinger en aangaan. Mense kom, mense gaan weg, die lewe gaan aan, daar is niks nie, jy leef net voort....” (71).

The putative escape for Anton at the end of the novel is that he will write a book about these people and he will go overseas and, as Schoeman suggests, become Paul—almost.

It may be pure coincidence that the object of Anton’s desire is Ingrid whose love affair with a married man is doomed and who is also the character with whom Anton has two of the most important moments of fulfilled sharing that focus on time, memory and writing, themes among the most central to the novel. Louise Viljoen (152) notes that Ingrid Jonker is visible in *Die noordelig* and the Ingrid figure in the later novel is certainly more fully formed by the dead poet than the character who bears her name in *Spiraal*.

In *Die noorderlig*, we find three central characters: Paul, through whom the narrative is

focalised, has lived in voluntary exile in Amsterdam for several years and designs inane advertisements; Ina, a friend from the past, is now married to a South African diplomat and on her way back to South Africa with him after many years of being posted abroad; Estelle Naudé, who made up their threesome when they were students in Bloemfontein and later as young people in Cape Town, is the “Ingrid figure,” the charismatic daughter of a nationalist MP. As a student of the now-retired Bakkies Dreyer, she was feisty, contestatory and gifted with a sharp satirical sensibility. She grew up without a mother (110) and was a poet, a rebel and lover of a coloured man, Sidney, who dies in prison. Estelle finally commits suicide and has a funeral very reminiscent of the debacle of Ingrid Jonker’s first funeral, where her father and Lulu Brewis insisted on an embarrassing official performance with a *predikant* who knew nothing of the poet, pallbearers who had no commitment to her and her social and literary friends separated from the official mourners over on the other side of the grave (Metelerkamp, 378-381).^{vi} As in *The Dawn Comes Twice*, death is the tragic escape from violent landscapes, both political and emotional. Like Cope’s protagonist, Estelle sees into the heart of darkness. After Sidney’s politically motivated death, she tells Paul: “Dis...dis dat die grond skielik voor my voete oopgeskeur het en ek iets boos gesien het....Dis ’n hele netwerk van onregverdigheid waarvan ons almal deel uitmaak, dis die onderlag van ons lewens. Die hele stelsel is aangetas, soos deur ’n soort kanker: alles—ek is self ook besmet daardeur. Ons is almal besmet” (95).

The present-day of the novel takes place in Amsterdam (written in 1974, South Africa is still under siege by apartheid). Paul and Ina reunite for one day and remember Estelle and their friendship with her. Recalling her is also partly prompted by the irony that Bakkies Dreyer now intends to write a monograph on Estelle, whom he scarcely understood or tolerated while she was a student of his, but he hopes that Paul will feed him with anything he remembers of Estelle. Dreyer’s summary of Estelle reads like a list of the clichés that continue to swirl around Jonker (somewhat reminiscent of the satire in *Opdrag*, discussed in the first part of this essay):

‘Sy het ’n belangrike naam in onse letterkunde geword, weet jy...belangriker miskien as wat haar werk regverdig. Sy het blykbaar die verbeelding van die jonger geslag beetgegryp—met haar poësie én met haar tragiese dood—en sy het die afgelope jare as ’t ware ’n modefiguur geword: ’n kultus figuur sou mens byna kan sê.’ Hy knoop sy serp vaster terwyl hy praat. (22).

Dreyer, of course, prefers the old guard like Totius or the Dutch “giants,” but grudgingly admits that one must keep in touch with what is current in one’s country, even if one cannot approve. Paul’s memories are painfully reactivated by his distressing encounter with the Dreyers, but he will, of course, not part with them for Dreyer’s monograph. The anxiety and apprehension produced by recovering memory, especially when it recovers traumatic histories, is evident in the metaphor of the tunnel that governs Paul’s reluctant revisiting of his past in South Africa: “Wie is dit wat hy voor hom sien, so ver weg soos die mense op die volgende brug, aan die einde van die lang, donker laning, die lang, donker tunnel, in die helder sonksyn?” (23). The image of the tunnel transforms agonisingly:

Af in die tregter, af in die draaikolk, so vinnig afgetrek in die donker dat sy asem wegslaan. Dit is doelbewus en opsetlik dat hy hierdie dinge opsy geskuif het om vergeet te word, dat hy sy herinnerings uitgewis en ou foto’s en briewe vernietig het, om onbelemmerd ’n nuwe lewe te kan begin, úit deur die lang en donker tunnel in hierdie glashelder lig. (24)

One of the most resonant ways in which Schoeman dramatises the gradual unfolding of the memory of Estelle is Paul's grasping after the fragments of her poetry. (It is uncanny that the real-life Berta Smit does the same thing in her interview with van der Merwe, as discussed above, having destroyed all her correspondence). Ina accuses Paul of being one of the three men who played a significant role in Estelle's life and none of them did her any good, leading to Paul's flashback montage of Estelle barefoot on the grass, her hair lit by the sun, laughing on a bench, dressed in a wrinkled floral robe:

Ja, sy het min geluk geken, en hy wat, byna toevallig, soveel van haar verdriet meegemaak het, het dit weer vergeet, het selfs byna vir h  ar vergeet, totdat hy vandag opnuut aan haar herinner is. Estelle met glansende hare, alleen in 'n groot donker: soos 'n blom...

Hy kyk op, onseker; sien die straat met sy mense, en jong boompies waaraan die spits groen blare verskyn. Wat is die eggo; wat is die woorde wat hom ontwyk?

*Ek val
soos 'n blom: deur die duister...*

Is dit reg? *Deur die donker?* Hy is nie meer seker nie. Dit is die aanvang van een van Estelle se vroe  gedigte. En hoe gaan dit verder? Hy weet nie. (47)

And, later:

Ja, onthou hy, dit is 'n versie, 'n liedjie, uit die bundel wat in die Kaapse tyd verskyn het; 'n rympie, niks meer nie.

*Wat bly, wat bly
vir jou, vir my...*

...Is dit reg? *V n, v n my?* Net die sangerige ritme het in sy geheue gebly, die woorde vergete.

*En al wat ek
nog van jou vra...*

Maar hoe gaan dit verder? Hy sou vir Ina kan vra, maar hy wil nie.

*En wil nie wys word nie of leer
maar wag slegs dat jy terug moet keer*

Is dit reg? (66)^{vii}

Ina has proposed that of all the men in her life, Paul meant most to Estelle (46), which explains why she was sure Estelle would open her door to him after she had retreated into grief and rage at the death of Sidney (93). The glimpse of words that he remembers are, significantly then, words that speak of Estelle's sense of abandonment (as, in real life, the guilt-ridden Berta remembers lines that describe the loss of someone beloved). The shaky uncertainty of Paul's memory is significant and he wonders: "Is dit verbeelding of haal sy herinnering nog die juiste beelde te voorskyn: is dit net omdat die tunnel waarlanks hy terugkyk so lank en so donker is dat die w reld aan die einde daarvan so helder vertoon,

stralend in die lig?” (88). A refrain in the unfolding of his memory is the contrast between the the journey into the coldness that he has undertaken—“al hoe verder in steeds groter koue; tussen die pakys, tussen die dryfys, tussen ysskotse en glansende ysberge, tot watter vreemde en onbekende hoogtes, skitterend in die yl reënbooggians van die noorderlig” (66)—and the almost blinding brightness of the past once the tunnel into that forgotten, forsaken world has been traversed: he remembers “die verblindende felheid van die somerson en die prag van die sonsondergang” (88). He believes that he cannot physically return (66) to what he calls “’n land vol belofte,” or, as Ina responds, “die belóófde land” (62), with its bright colours:

Dis seker net my verbeelding, want ek het nooit êrens anders sulke helder kleure teruggevind soos ek dáár onthou nie—Spanje, Portugal, Griekeland, Italië...Hele plate vygies en gousblomme, hele massas bougainvillea—ons het onder die bougainvillea geëet op die terras, onthou jy, met die see ver onderkant. Waar was dit? Die poinsettias en die bloureën, die kannas, ’n huis omring met ’n heining van bloedrooi hibiskus, drie, vier meter hoog...En altyd daardie hitte, en die diepblou lug en die son wat alles deurdrenk, wat indring in die grond, in die klip...Was dit regtig so? Was dit regtig so mooi?” (65).

As the memories clarify, he begins to see a fuller scene of that lunch under the bougainvilleas and, indeed, it is linked crucially to a memory of Estelle in a white dress against the bright blue of either sea or sky, standing with Sidney’s arm around her, colours blazing around them (85-88). Paul will dream that image on the night of her suicide, repress it and recover it once more in the course of his wandering with Ina through Amsterdam (97-98).

What is interesting and affecting, in my present context, is the power of the “Ingrid-figure” to haunt the writers whose imaginations have embraced her. So, too, Estelle’s death is experienced as rupture, as trauma. He was with her on her last night, saw she was in a terrible state after the death-in-prison of Sidney, her coloured friend, comrade and lover, and did what he could to calm her and help her, but did not stay through the night with her and lives with the guilt and the memories. The news of her death marks the climax of that particular chapter after Paul’s restless night spent struggling with his images of Estelle as he left her and as he remembered her and Sidney: “Dit was eers teen die middag dat Ina hom op kantoor bel om vir hom te sê dat Estelle dood is” (98).

Ina declares in the present that when Estelle died, “toe was alles oor. Daarna was niks ooit weer dieselfde nie” (100). For Paul, too, at the end of this difficult, heartbreaking day, after he bids Ina farewell at the train station, he feels an overwhelming melancholy figured in the dark waters of Amsterdam’s canals (that recall Ingrid’s poem, “Donker Stroom”, and, indeed, Schoeman’s own sense of loss): “Hy ken hierdie droefhyd, besef hy waar hy langs die donker water loop: in Amsterdam het hy dit geken in die begintyd, en in Kaapstad in die maande ná Estelle se dood. Toe was hy jonk en onervare en kon hy dit begryp nòg verklaar net voortdra aan die treurigheid wat soos ’n mantel óm hom hang” (109). The tunnel that he has been navigating throughout the day becomes clearer to him as a journey through time into the beloved spaces and places of his childhood (plaintively captured, too, in the image of Schoeman as a little boy that adorns the front cover of *Die laaste Afrikaanse boek*), his history, Afrikaner history immediately after the Anglo-Boer war:

Ja natuurlik, besef hy dan, daardie laning, daardie tonnel ken hy: dit is die ou kweperlaning op die plaas wat sy oupa-grootjie geplant het; en ná die Oorlog, toe sy grootvader en sy gesin uit die kampe terugkom na die verwoeste plaas, het hulle in die laning gekampeer totdat die woonhuis herbou is. Deur die laning het hy as kind

gehardloop, deur die vlekke lig, deur die digter en donkerder skadu, om dan, beangs en opgewonde, die huis weer voor hom te vind. (109)

But it is also a history that led him to flee “die bose” and, in a far-off land, start coming to terms with that evil, as he does when, like Estelle, he acknowledges that “Ons is almal skuldig...Ons is almal sondaars” (107). Out of that admission of complicity, he also accepts that he can no longer judge the sins of the fathers, his father: “Daar is net die medelye; en berou oor alles waarin ek tekortgeskiet het, oor al die versuim wat nou onherroeplik geword het. Ek kan nie meer terruggaan en verskoning vra nie, ek kan niks meer goedmaak nie” (106-107). The sense of the loss of family, of land and of self is of a piece with the novel that Schoeman wrote a few years earlier: *Na die geliefde land* (1972), that dramatised the paranoia of Afrikaners in the face of radical change. The guilt of the self-created exile is expressed in aching rhythms and repetitions as Paul leans over a bridge: “Hy het weggegaan van die plaas; hy het afskeid geneem van sy vader en die ou man in sy eensaamheid agtergelaat. Hy leun op die reling van die brug en kyk af na die weerkaatse lig van die straatlampe wat in skilfers op die glansende water drywe. Hy het weggegaan” (109).

There is perhaps some touching irony in the fact that Schoeman, writing in Afrikaans, evokes the shifting light and bewitching glimmer of Amsterdam even as he mourns the past in another country.

Like *Na die geliefde land* (1972), the novel conjures the themes of mourning, memory and futility with exquisite grace. Estelle is figured as the fugitive heart of that loss and futility. Insofar as the “Ingrid figure,” as imagined through Estelle, is filtered through flashes of memory, half-formed, slippery, fading into shadow, breaking through into the sunlight, she cannot finally be pinned down. Yes, her political consciousness and pain are at the forefront, but constantly framed by glancing moments that play off each other to evoke her multiple selves: her too-wide mouth, her carelessness of personal image, her untidiness, as well as her charm, her attractiveness when she chose, her patience and kindness with children and old people (44-45):

Kaalvoet staan sy daar op die gras, en dan skielik slaan sy bolmakiesie en verdwyn laggend tussen die struik, uit die oog, uit sy geheue, uit die beeld wat sy herinnering van die verlede bewaar het.

“Sy was ’n vitale mens,” sê hy, nog besig om woorde te soek waarin daardie beeld vasgevat kan word.” (45)

Had Schoeman read Cope’s essay from which the title of my “Ingrid project” is taken, one wonders?

ⁱ This conundrum is the focus of an interesting discussion in Petrovna Metelerkamp’s biography of Ingrid. She addresses the views of Dr Jack de Wet, who counselled Ingrid and was interviewed by L.M. van der Merwe. De Wet is of the view that Ingrid was never the victim of endogenous depression, but that circumstances—her unsettled childhood, her relationships with men, her financial struggles—conspired to drive her to despair (194). Metelerkamp notes the freewheeling speculations of those who purported to know her and declared her to be the victim of innate or inherited insanity, schizophrenia, paranoia, nymphomania or, in Michael Cope’s truculent view, she was “a borderline personality” (193).

ⁱⁱ Mrs Coward's English name is suggestive as an outsider who nevertheless, or perhaps therefore, mediates revelations in the text. The name itself may suggest her fear of acting; she can only accept catastrophe and try to rationalise it, as in the case of Julia/the Tikster's brother or her own dead husband. But she is also a grieving woman who tries to extend compassion and mothering to compensate for her own childlessness.

ⁱⁱⁱ Most specifically in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), but applicable to many of his characters, especially in the later novels.

^{iv} Compare with his comment on how understated the theme is in Julian Green's *South*—Schoeman only realised it was there when he read the reviews (2002: 370).

^v There are intimations here of Robert Graves' "The Cool Web" or T.S. Eliot's lines from "Burnt Norton."

^{vi} If one is in the mood for sleuthing, it is at least mildly intriguing that "Estelle" was the name of Brink's first wife and that "Stella" is the name of Stephen's betrayed wife in *Spiraal*. Both may point to Tennessee Williams's Stella, another betrayed wife, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which Schoeman read as a twelve-year-old boy. He notes how the homosexual theme was muted here too, in the version of the play he read (*Die Laaste Afrikaanse Boek*, 209).

^{vii} The focus on rhythm recalls an engaging moment in Ingrid Jonker's interview with the SABC in 1964 where she is invited to describe her creative process. She replies: "Ek kry byvoorbeeld 'n gevoel van die ritme van 'n gedig, en die vorm soos hy moet lyk, en dan soms visuele indrukke. Nie juis gedagtes, denkbeelde nie, maar visuele indrukke, vorme, ritme. Dit is die eerste—en dan daarna, kom 'n gedig taamlik vlot by my" (Metelerkamp, 2018: 320). Paul remembers Estelle as someone who was always in love with words, language, working through thoughts and linking sound and rhythm together (36). Of a piece with Schoeman's own love of language, one might add. When he was awarded the Order of Ikamanga by President Mandela on 10 June, 1999, he said it was "a special honour for the Afrikaans language" (Erika Terblanche, *Litnet*). There is a very moving coda, drawn from Schoeman's meditation on how all his early books engaged with his experience of South Africa and manifested, however subtly, his need to return. Reading Nicholas Boyle's biography of Goethe, he takes hold of the comment, "an exile from Germany that would spell emotional death." Schoeman continues: "Vir myself sou ek dit nie so kon formuleer het nie, maar die beskrywing is vir my nie minder geldig nie, want as ek nog onbepaalde tyd sou weggebly het, sou dit vir my al hoe moeiliker geword het om nog in Afrikaans te skryf, en al hoe minder moontlik om nog iets oor of vir die Afrikaner te sê. Vir wie sou ek nog uiteindelik geskryf het, en waaroor, en as ek nie meer kon skryf nie, wat sou ek daar moet doen, in Glasgow of Cavendish, Amsterdam of Berlyn?"

als zij mijn stem niet horen zullen

als zij dromen in hun menselijke duisternis

als zij mijn stem niet horen

is het leven veel korter

En so het ek dus teruggegaan." (2002: 460-61)

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