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Resensie-artikel

Opmerkings oor die Versindaba en vyf nuwe bundels uit Protea Boekhuis

Versindaba.

Marlise Joubert (samesteller). Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 2007. 73 pp. ISBN 978-1-86919-210-5.

Sloper.

Louis Esterhuizen. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 2007. 93 pp. ISBN 978-1-86919-186-3.

passies en passasies.

Marlise Joubert. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 2007. 128 pp. ISBN 978-1-86919-186-3.

Die afdruk van ons hande.

Cas Vos. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 2007. 99 pp. ISBN 978-1-86919-177-1.

Sonskyf.

Trienke Laurie. Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 2007. 103pp. ISBN 978-1-86919-165-8.

1

Min Afrikaanse digters wat digbundels in 2007 die lig laat sien het, het nie van 6 tot 8 September tydens Versindaba 2007 op Stellenbosch opgetree nie.

T. T. Cloete (met *Heilige nuuskierigheid*) was byvoorbeeld nie daar nie, omdat sy gesondheid hom nie toegelaat het om die lang reis vanaf Potchefstroom te onderneem nie. Helena Conradie het toe uit sy poësie voorgelees. Breyten Breytenbach, wat in die buiteland woonagtig is, is deur Ampie Coetzee verteenwoordig. Laasgenoemde het 'n keur uit Breytenbach se *Die windoanger* voorgedra. Hoewel haar naam op die Versindaba 2007-program verskyn het, het 'n onverwagte besering ook verhoed dat Jeanne Goosen uit haar *Elders aan diens* kon voorlees. Nicole Holm het toe ingespring en dit namens haar gedoen. Ek noem ook nog Trienke Laurie en Johan Steyn wat nie op Stellenbosch was nie; hul bundels, onderskeidelik *Sonskyf* en *Geboorte is 'n ongerief* getiteld, het eers later in die jaar op die boekrakke verskyn.

Die vergelyking met die lys van optreders by die Versindaba word doelbewus gedoen om die toonaangewende (eintlik: toonweerspieëlende) rol wat dié geleentheid binne die bestek van drie jaar in die Afrikaanse poësieveld gaan speel het, te beklemtoon. Die digter Louis Esterhuizen, met die onmisbare (organisasoriese en finansiële) steun van Nicol Stassen, baas van Protea Boekhuis, het die indaba geloods as 'n jaarlikse geleentheid wat uitsluitlik op oorspronklike en vertaalde Afrikaanse

poësie fokus, asook selektief op die daarmee verwante liedkuns. Hulle het die bystand van Jannie Mouton as mede-hoofborg bekom, terwyl ook die Stellenbosse Woordfeeskantoor, Genugtig!- en LAPA-uitgewers, die Hiemstra Trust en Marlise Joubert (Esterhuizen se wederhelf en voormalige werknemer by Protea Boekhuis) se hulp bekom is om die onderneming te laat slaag.

En dié span kan reeds aansienlike suksesse aanteken.

Die voorlesings deur die digters of hul verteenwoordigers by die indaba gaan nou jaarliks gepaard met 'n hele aantal sang- en dramatiese voordragitems. Daar is ook 'n boekekiosk by die indaba, waar publikasies van al die Afrikaanse poësie-uitgewers te koop aangebied word. 'n Dana Mouton-gedenklesing word jaarliks gelewer as deel van die program. (In 2007 was Lina Spies die referent.) Die aankondiging van die Protea-pryswenner (die prystoekening gaan uitsluitlik vir oorspronklike Afrikaanse poësie) geskied op die laaste aand van die indaba. (In 2007 vir publikasies uit 2006 toegeken aan Antjie Krog vir *Verweerskrif*, ook die Ingrid Jonker-prys van die voormalige Afrikaanse Skrywersgilde is dieselfde aand oorhandig, naamlik aan Danie Marais vir *Uit die buitenste ruimte*.) Daar is ook begin met die aanbied van poësie-slypskole vir verskillende ervarendheidsgroepe, georganiseer deur die Departement Afrikaans en Nederlands aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosch. Voorts vergesel die vrystelling van 'n bloemlesing, uitgegee deur Protea Boekhuis, telkens die geleentheid. Die uitgewersbrief wat die resensie-eksemplaar van *Versindaba 2007* vergesel het (die bloemlesing word hierna bespreek), verduidelik die opset van dié publikasie: "Die bloemlesing bevat gedigte van digters wat tans aktief is en van wie daar in 2006 en 2007 bundels verskyn. [Dit] bied 'n waardevolle oorsig van wat tans in die Afrikaanse digkuns gebeur."

Sulke "institusionele" suksesse weeg egter nie op teen die waarde wat die gebeurtenis het om digters, hul bundels en hul (bestaande en potensiële) lesers by mekaar uit te bring nie. Stassen verklaar in die "Voorwoord" tot *Versindaba 2007* dat die bywoning in 2005 en 2006 "almal se stoutste verwagtinge oortref [het]. Gedurende elke *Versindaba* was daar 'n groter opkoms as die gemiddelde oplaag van 'n Afrikaanse digbundel, of eintlik enige digbundel in enige taal ter wêreld."

Of die *Versindaba* 'n stimulerende uitwerking het op bundelverkope of op die kreatiwiteit van Afrikaanse digters, is nog te vroeg om te sê. Die feit dat slegs drie "opkomende digters" se werk in *Versindaba 2007* opgeneem kon word, is dalk ietwat ontmoedigend, soos byvoorbeeld Rachelle Greef in haar *Rapport*-resensie oor die bloemlesing aangestip het. Dié gebrek aan debutante kan natuurlik nie gewyt word aan die *Versindaba*-poging nie; intendeel.

Protea Boekhuis, uitgewer van al vyf die digversamelings wat hierna bespreek word, verdien dus 'n klop op die skouer vir wat op die Afrikaanse poësieterrein vermag is sedert 2000, toe dié uitgewer die eerste keer 'n Afrikaanse digbundel gepubliseer het in reaksie op die nypende tekort aan publikasiegeleenthede daarvoor aan

die einde van die negentien-negentigerjare (Odendaal 2006: 105–6; Stassen 2005: 9). Dat hierdie uitgewer voortstoegetree het tot die publikasie van vertaalde poësie uit en na Afrikaans, strek myns insiens bykomend tot sy eer. In 2007 het byvoorbeeld die uiters boeiende vertalings deur H. J. Pieterse van die Duitstalige Rainer Maria Rilke se *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino-elegieë*), asook deur Charl-Pierre Naudé van sy eie 2004-bundel *In die geheim van die nag* na Engels (titel: *Against the light*), by Protea verskyn.

2

Hoewel die “oorheersende rol” van gehalteoorwegings by Marlise Joubert se samestelling van *Versindaba 2006* erken is in die gepaardgaande uitgewersbrief, het Nicol Stassen as uitgewer al in die voorwoord tot dié tweede bloemlesing in die reeks beklemtoon dat nie ’n versameling “in die estetiese tradisie” beoog word nie, maar “’n deursnit of momentopname”; eintlik “’n meer omvangryke en genuanseerde beeld” van die Afrikaanse poësie gedurende ’n bepaalde jaar “as wat uit die verskyning van digbundels alleen afgelei kan word”.

Joubert het met die samestelling van *Versindaba 2007* weer kwaliteit as uitgangspunt geneem, maar tog ook “gepoog om ’n verskeidenheid temas en style aan te bied” (Protea Boekhuis 2007 – uitgewersbrief by die resensie-eksemplaar). Die meeste bydraes kom derhalwe van “digters van wie daar onlangs ’n bundel verskyn het, of binnekort ’n bundel gaan verskyn”. Soos die vorige kere is egter ook “ander bekende en belowende Afrikaanse digters” genooi om gedigte vir publikasie voor te lê.

Uit 7 van die 12 gebloemleesde “gevestigde digters” se penne het (oorspronklike of vertaalde) bundels in 2007 verskyn; die ander 5 het in 2006 digwerke die lig laat sien. Onder die “opkomende digters” was dit egter slegs Bernard Odendaal wat in 2007 met ’n eie debuutbundel vorendag gekom het, naamlik met *Onbedoelde land*.

Hoe lyk die “genuanseerde beeld” wat hierdie bloemlesing van die Afrikaanse poësie *anno 2007* bied?

Daar is myns insiens min wat waarlik nuut is. Tendense van die afgelope tien jaar en meer word voortgesit. Afrikaans klink byvoorbeeld in hierdie verse op in ’n verskeidenheid variëteite, naamlik as ’n uitvloeisel van die bestendige strewe na spreektaaligheid in die toonaangewende twintigste-eeuse Afrikaanse poësie, maar soos wat veral sedert die negentien-vyftiger- en -sestigerjare al duideliker waarneembaar geword het. (Kyk Odendaal 2006: 108–15.) In die meeste gevalle word Standaardafrikaans gebruik, maar ook Griekwa-Afrikaans (deur Hans du Plessis) en Kaapse Afrikaans (deur Willem Fransman jr.) kom voor.

Vaster vorme (by veral T. T. Cloete en Joan Hambidge) en vryer digsoorte (veral opvallend by Jeanne Goosen, Willem Fransman jr. en Bernard Odendaal) wissel mekaar af, soos ook meer liriese, selfs liedagtige werk (Hans du Plessis, Marlise Joubert, George Weideman) en meer vertellende of besinnende “praatverse” (Gilbert Gibson,

Dolf van Niekerk, M. M. Walters, Willem Fransman jr., Charlton Lee George en Bernard Odendaal).

Besonders is die insluiting van voorbeelde van vertaalde werk, naamlik die derde Duino-elegie van Rilke soos deur H. J. Pieterse vertaal (as onderdeel van die genoemde bundel *Duineser Elegien / Duino-elegieë*) en 'n klaaglied deur Cas Vos gebaseer op 'n fragment uit die Gilgamesj-epos, waarvan meer fragmentverwerkings verskyn in sy bundel *Die afdruk van ons hande*. Die frisse indruk wat dié vertalings/verwerkings maak is nie net 'n pluimpie vir Pieterse en Vos nie, maar ook 'n bewys van die belangrike verrykende invloed wat (goeie) vertalings in 'n doeltaalletterkunde kan hê. (H. P. van Coller se vertalings van 'n keur uit die verskuns van die Vlaming Luuk Gruwez, in 2007 uitgegee deur Praag onder die titel *Bandelose gedigte*, is ook in hierdie verband te noem.)

(Suid-)Afrikaanse identiteitsvraagstukke, politieke en maatskaplike toestande in Suid-Afrika, vrese oor die voortbestaan van Afrikaans, die reis- en swerfmotief, die uitbeelding van geweld en protes daarteen – dit is almal onderwerpe wat te berde kom in aansluiting by kwessies wat Afrikaanse digters al lank besig hou. En dan, natuurlik, is daar ook heelparty gedigte oor universele temas, byvoorbeeld die nuanse van interpersoonlike verhoudings, veral soos betref die liefde en die verlies daarvan; ook portretterings van geliefdes kom voor. Die steeds sterke stroom van religieuse Afrikaanse poësie word aangevul in die verse van T. T. Cloete en Hans du Plessis, terwyl M. M. Walters op sy kenmerkende wyse religieuse en kerklike aangeleenthede satiriseer.

Verblydend is die feit dat hoë kwaliteit digwerk byna deurgaans gehandhaaf word, wat die beeld van die huidige Afrikaanse digkuns tog weer lewenskragtig laat voorkom. Ook die meerderheid van die bundels wat hierna bespreek word, weerspieël hierdie positiewe toedrag van sake.

3

Sloper is die sewende digbundel van die Versindaba-inisieerder en -organiseerder Louis Esterhuizen. Syne is 'n oeuvre wat veral sedert *Die onderwaterweg* (1996) 'n sterk stygende lyn getoon het, en met *Opslagsomer* (2001), *Liefland* (2004) en nou *Sloper* 'n peil handhaaf wat respek afdwing.

Die oorheersende tema in laasgenoemde drie bundels is die (nuutgevonde, nuutmakende en singewende) liefde. Aanvanklik is dié liefde in erotiese en emosionele ekstase beleef, maar in *Sloper* versoer dit tot iets wat ook met dankbare agting en selfs beklemming bejeën word weens die verwagte (onvermydelike) verlies daarvan. Van die roerendste liefdesgedigte in die bundel is juis dié waarin die verganklikheids- en veredelingsbesef sterk meespeel, byvoorbeeld "Al slapende", "Lament", "Die knoop sonder tou", "Die verlies van tuin", "Ode aan die deur" en "Die weduwees".

Myns insiens vind die genoemde versobering ook op stilistiese vlak uitdrukking. 'n Belydende inslag is nog weldeeglik aanwesig, maar dit is tog asof daar 'n sterker element van objektivering intree: eerstens deur die nóg prominenter beelding, dié keer veral in terme van die huismetafoor (treffend aan bod gestel deur die voorbladfoto en die alleenstaande openingsgedig); tweedens deur die besinnende inslag van die derde afdeling, "Sloping van die geluk". Vergelyk in verband met beide strategieë die volgende grepe uit die gedig "Ode aan 'n huis":

Ook dít sal ons verloor –
die skemerlig van jou vertrekke
saans wanneer die dag greep

vervat [...]

[...]
en ons skuif

ons begeerte soos meubels
rond, versier die kaal kolle
in ons gesprek

met skildery en ornament, enigiets om die vermoede
te wek: hier is ons tuis,
teen dié verwisseling is ons
bestand.

Die betrokkenheid by die Suid-Afrikaanse sosiaal-politieke aktualiteite, wat in byvoorbeeld *Liefland* so kragtig gemanifesteer het, is meer gedemp aanwesig in *Sloper*, hoofsaaklik in gedigte VII-IX van die afdeling "Langnagvure". Ander temas uit sy vorige bundels wat ook opvallend opduik, is dié van die problematiese vader-seunverhouding en die mislukte eerste huwelik – dus eintlik maar net ander manifestasies van die liefdesbeleving, sy dit dan van die skending daarvan.

Ná die verkenning van die huidige, geborge liefdeslewe in die afdeling "Sluiper", kies die digter 'n persona genaamd "Egbert" om, na aanleiding van aanmoedigende vrae deur die geliefde, selfonthullend te mymer oor die verlede in die afdeling "Langnagvure". Ervaringe en woonplekke uit die jeugjare; die mynersouerhuis en die meermaals gespanne verhoudinge daarbinne; jeugliefdes; belewenisse van die verteller as onderwyser; herinneringe aan 'n skeefgeloopte eerste huwelik – dit alles en nog meer kom ter sprake.

Dit behels in wese 'n poging om in die reine te kom met die eie, soms problematiese verlede en met die durende kwellinge daaromheen. In die besinnende derde

afdeling, "Die slooping van geluk", word dié proses verder voltrek. Daar word afgereken met gewilde sienings oor geluk as blote behoeftebevrediging, onder meer deur denkers uit verskillende tydperke aan te haal en te parafreseer (ongelukkig met die gevolg dat die liriese spanning in enkele verse ietwat verslap en daar plek-plek iets prosaïes intree). Ook word die versplinterdheid tussen byvoorbeeld goed en kwaad in die mens, asook sy ewige onvergenoegdheid in die kollig geplaas. Vergelyk onderskeidelik "Nie dat dit brand nie, maar dryf", "Daar is ook nog dié gewilde tekening" en "Die mens is 'n beleërde stad", en "Repos Ailleurs" in laasgenoemde verbande.

Om slegs 'n fisiese slooping (die onvermydelike liggaamlike veroudering en sterflikheid) gaan dit dus nie, maar ook om 'n emosionele en selfs intellektuele een – byvoorbeeld aangaande te hoë verwagtings vir die self en die mens in die algemeen. Vergelyk die volgende uit die ongetitelde slotvers van die derde afdeling:

[...] telkens weer die onthou

wat aan 'n chromosoom se intonasie
toevertrou is: die moeë stamboom

van oorsaak en gevolg, van 'n gees
oor water wat die atoom splits

in oomblikke van was
en wou wees.

Die strekking van die bundelgeheel is dus enersyds nogal pessimisties. Die konklusie waartoe blykens die twee gedigte in die slotafdeling, "Sluitstukke", gekom word, is dat die verlede, ook die gronde van die huidige geluk, wesenlik onverklaarbaar, onherwinbaar en derhalwe onbeheerbaar is. Tog, op die spoor van N. P. van Wyk Louw se "Groot ode", steek daar blykens die gedig "Veel liefliker is dit" iets manhaftigs en helends in die aanvaarding van

[...] hierdie oomblik
so sonder vraag

of verwynt[.]

Daardeur kan dit iets word wat 'n mens kan noem

[...] *vreugde*
terwyl die drif nog bestaan
vir die mens om ironies te wil leef

en die liefde steeds
te behou.

Esterhuizen is 'n gevoelvolle, liriese digter wat eerder van vryer versvorme en langer, meesleurende sinspatrone gebruik maak. 'n Beeld- of woordkeusetroebelheidjie hier en daar, asook enkele biografiese verhoudhede wat mistifiserend vir die leser mag wees, kom, soos in sy vorige bundels, wel voor. Tog word hierdie gedigte struktureel en stilisties grootliks geslaagd en treffend in bedwang gehou, veral vanweë Esterhuizen se beeldingskrag én die wyse waarop hy motiewe dwarsdeur die bundel vleg.

Die soms pynlike ontboesemings wat in *Sloper* gelewer word, gryp die leser derhalwe aan – dikwels ook weens hulle poëtiese gehalte.

4

Lyfsange (2001), die bundel waarmee Marlise Joubert na 'n digterlike swye van byna 15 jaar weer van haar laat hoor het, het 'n hoogtepunt in haar bydrae tot die Afrikaanse liefdespoësie verteenwoordig. Met *passies en passasies*, haar sesde bundel, wat in 'n aantreklike uitgawe in 2007 by Protea Boekhuis verskyn het, versterk sy hierdie bydrae verder, en verruim dit om ook op ander tematiese terreine iets wesenliks toe te voeg tot die Afrikaanse digkunsskat.

Blykens die bundel- en afdelingsmotto's is dit 'n spesifiek vroulike ervaring wat vooropgestel word.

Die *passies* van die bundeltitle slaan op die rykdom van haar liefdes: vir haar man en ander geliefdes; vir die Waterberg-kontrei waarin sy grootgeword het, asook vir die Boland waar sy tans woon; vir taal; vir die kunste; vir die baie alledaagse dinge wat die sinne verruk. Die *passasies*-deel sinjaleer enersyds die ryke intertekstuele spel (met filosofiese, literêre, musikale, skilderkunstige en ander werke, maar ook met literêre vorme soos die ballade, die slaapliedjie, die brief, die prieslied, ensovoorts) wat in die bundel gevoer word – byvoorbeeld in die talle vrye vertalings, verwerkings en voortdigtings op verse en liedere van diverse oorspronge wat voorkom. Op die vlak van die artistieke bemoeienis oorvleuel bogenoemde twee tematiese onderskeidingsvelde dus; 'n raakvlak wat ook al deur die alliterasieverband tussen die twee titelnaamwoorde aangedui word.

Trouens, so intens is die inspelings vanuit die verskillende artistieke velde (veral wat metafore uit die musiekwêreld betref) dat 'n mens hier en daar vir stilistiese verestetiseerdheid vrees. Vergelyk die volgende passasie uit die sewende vers van die reeks "voordragte e.a. sange", met as gedigtitel "soos al die oggende ...":

ons leef in ringe van jare met basviole

met tjello's en fluite leef ons uit elke seisoen
asem ons al die oggende van die wêreld in[.]

Maar die tweede titeldeel roep (via die betekenismoontlikheid van "oortog" of "reis" wat *passasie* verder het) ook die teendeel van die dikwels ekstatische belewenisse op: die bewustheid van verganklikheid en verval. Om hierdie rede dat, hoewel soveel beskrywe staan wat van lewenslus en -genot spreek, die bundel tog 'n sterk elegiese toonaard openbaar. Passie en sterflikheid staan bipolêr verbind. Soos die slot van die eerste van die reeds vermelde "voordragte e.a. sange" lui:

as die nagreis kom
dans jy die passasies van liefde

dans jy teen die droefnis in.

Die sangerigheid, oftewel die lieddaard van baie van die meermaals langerige verse in hierdie bundel, dra ongetwyfeld tot die elegiese "klank" daarvan by. 'n Reeks van vier "sleursange" besluit byvoorbeeld die bundel.

In die eerste bundelafdeling, getiteld "die omsingelde huis", word waarnemings en belewings verwoord van vroue wat deur verskillende dinge as 't ware beleër word: deur die blik van die (manlike) kunstenaar; deur haar afslowende dagtake as moeder en vrou; deur geweld, dood en wanhoop; deur modieuse sienings van die rol van die hedendaagse vrou; ensovoorts.

Sekere gedigte hier bied ook 'n onthullende, ontluisterende selfblik deur die subjek. In die sestienjarige "snitte uit 'n oggend", gebou op basis van die klankbaan van die kunsfilm *Tous les matins du monde* ("al die oggende in die wêreld"), word byvoorbeeld op boeiend poëtiese wyse verslag gedoen van 'n kunstenaar (Joubert is 'n kunsskilder) se vroegoggendervarings. Via die musiek wat sy beluister en dit wat sy tussendeur sintuiglik ervaar, asook deur wat sy lees, onthou, oor nadink en haar verbeel terwyl sy haar was, voed en klee, stroom groter wêreld haar persoonlike bestaan binne – totdat die laserskyf ontnugterend deurgespeel het en sy haar dagtaaklysie aflees "soos 'n voetspoor vir die dag".

Iets wat my aan die raai het in dié reeks, is dat daar wel 'n voorlaaste gedigtitel voorkom ("15. Muzettes 1–11") – maar dan sonder enige gedigteks. Het dit iewers langs die pad na persklaarmaking verlore geraak? Het die digter nie iets gehad om onder hierdie titel (wat, soos die ander titels, verwys na 'n musieksnit op die laserskyf wat die klankbaan van die betrokke film bevat) te skryf nie? Hoekom dan die betrokke titel enigins in die gedigreëks opneem?

Die tweede bundelafdeling (“passies”) bevat hoofsaaklik (Hoogliedagtige) huweliksgedigte, meermale geïnspireer deur werk van die Joodse digter Yehuda Amichai, maar ook verse oor ander geliefde mans in die digteres se lewe (haar oupa en pa, ander minnaars, ’n vorige eggenoot). Soms doen dié pragtige liefdesverse simbolisties aan in hulle klank-, kleur- en beeldweelde, en oorstyg hulle die verstandelik-logiese. Slegs hier en daar word die beeldeenheid myns insiens as gevolg van hierdie weelde ietwat troebel. Vergelyk die volgende uit die gedig “droogvoets” (ten spyte daarvan dat die katedraal-, wynvat- en rivierbeelde vroeër in die gedig aangevoer word):

[...]
en om hulle vir ewig katedraal en dig te hou
verkies hy selibaat te wees die allure
van ’n huwelik slegs teen mure uitgeklok:
alle seisoene ’n geraamde portret

totdat sy alles herskommel
kind vat
huis vat
mank
uit die vate rol

om ook hierdie rivier met sy geheiligde sand
droogvoets oor te steek[.]

Afdeling III (“winterbriewe e.a.”) bevat klaag- en verlangverse oor en na vriende, kinders en mededigters, en handel telkens oor afskeid, skeiding, ontbering, vergetelheid of verganklikheid. Eensydig somber is dié gedigte egter nie. Lees maar hoe die digteres die draak steek met haar werk as boekhouer! (Soos voorheen vermeld, was Joubert betrokke by die bedryf van die Protea Boekwinkel op Stellenbosch; sy help ook met die reëlings rondom die Versindaba wat jaarliks aldaar plaasvind.) Ek haal ’n strofe of drie uit die gedig “een plus een ...” ter illustrasie aan:

[...]
niks te sê nie.
maar ek luister na Chopin.

ja, dit doen ek wel
met my boekhouerkop –
sy nokturnes minuskule kwiltstekies
wat fakture en kwotasies netjies inklavier
wat my dag se *payments* so perfek laat klop.

o luister na die ligte
kasregisters van Chopin!

Die slotafdeling, "sleursange" (verkeerdelik "III" genommer!), bevat weer eens hoofsaaklik liefdesgedigte, maar nou in meer opvallend liedagtige gedaante. Dié afdelings-titel ('n nuutskepping deur Joubert) roep iets van die aard van sakrale (psalmodiese) sange op, en dui op die huldiging van die liefde of op die beswering van die liefdesbedreigende magte wat in hierdie gedigte verwoord staan.

[*Plassies en passasies* is ongetwyfeld Joubert se uitmuntendste digterlike prestasie tot dusver. Dis 'n omvangryke bundel wat talle en talle pragtige gedigte bevat. Anders as in haar vorige bundels, is slegs hier en daar (miskien) 'n valse woordkeuse of 'n beeldtroebelheid aan te stip. Sy verwerf myns insiens hiermee 'n aansienlike statuur as 'n Afrikaanse digter van meer as net mooi liefdesverse.

5

Die digterlike potensiaal wat in Cas Vos se vorige drie digbundels sedert sy debuut in 1999 geopenbaar is, bereik myns insiens in *Die afdruk van ons hande* die vlak van afge-werktheid wat dit verdien.

Hierdie jongste gedigversameling deur die Pretoriaanse teoloog munt nou tref-fend uit deur die verlewige gebruik van geysde en idiomatiese uitdrukkings, asook van sitate uit alombekende tekste soos die Bybel en die Liedboek van die Kerk wat 'n mens stuk-stuk in sy vorige bundels leer waardeer het. Tesame met 'n on-ontwikkelde klankgevoeligheid en 'n vindingryke beeldsprakigheid word 'n stilistiese frisheid bewerkstellig wat meesleurend is.

Ter illustrasie die derde gedig uit die slotreeks van die derde bundelafdeling, waarin die slopende en vernietigende kragte en gebeure wat op die mens inwerk, of wat deur hom veroorsaak word, in die kollig staan.

Vryval

Poetry is a religion with no hope
– Jean Cocteau

In sy omswerwinge loop hy
'n virus in 'n klam skoot raak,
berg dit in sy binneste.
Daar groei 'n donker oog in hom
wat die laaste dae se skadu's kouer
oor sy voete en hande sien skuif.

Bedags oes sy maer vingers gedigte,
maar terwyl ure vervloei, klou hy bibberend
aan die pes se rug in 'n grys stroom.

Die dood spelend op sy skoot,
sit hy voor 'n venster, kyk hoe 'n vlag
die woorde japtrap en verstrooi.
Van liefhê sien hy lewe dwarrel
in die donker, lig soos kaf.

In gevalle soos dié werk die (byna speelse) taal- en poëtiese vernuf mee om die patosgeladenheid van die onderwerpmateriaal te relativeer; om dus 'n bepaalde afstandname ten opsigte daarvan in die hand te werk – met die verrassende gevolg dat die menslike broosheid en onmag juis sterker geopenbaar staan.

Nog 'n voorbeeld uit dieselfde afdeling, naamlik 'n gedig wat 'n bietjie lyk op 'n onvolledige ("gewonde"!) sonnet, maar wat tog iets van die 'onvermydelikheid' van die opbou en afloop van daardie gekte vorm behou:

Gewonde

Om uitbundige pyn span 'n verband;
sy skraal boude weerloos ontbloot.
Hy kyk diep in die oë van die dood:
uiteindelike, onweerstaanbare vyand.

Die wond in sy ribbekas
markeer suig-suig die hart se pas;
priesterpraatjies moet hom troos,
maar wat hy wil hê, is redeloos.

Hy wag sy oomblik af as prooi
om in die omhelsing van sy jagter te ontdooi.

Soos in sy vorige bundels kom gedigte met sulke eindrympatrone en reëlmatige strofebou spaarsamig voor, maar die verse vertoon nogtans 'n vormlike beheersdheid wat inderdaad "klassiek" aandoen (soos in die uitgewersbrief opgemerk word).

Die afdruk van ons hande bevat vier ongetitelde afdelings. In die eerste staan, soos voorheen in Vos se oeuvre, die teenstellings van beproewing, lyding en versugting aan die een kant, en die moontlikhede tot verlossing, bevryding en begenadiging aan die ander kant, gejukstaponeerd. Die openingsgedig, waarin die seisoene as 'n "lang-beenmeisie" voorgestel word wat "volkleur ingewaai" kom om uiteindelik "skadu-

wees se stukkende maskers / in die leë balsaal van die jaar” agter te laat, is ook ’n gepaste inleiding tot die bundelgeheel, waarin verydeling uitstaan op tematiese vlak.

In die tweede afdeling is verbeelding en illusie, byvoorbeeld ter aanvulling van tekortkominge in die werklikheid, asook die menslike sienings van en verwagtinge aangaande magiese en goddelike kragte die drade wat die gedigte aaneenvleg. Die tematiek van die derde afdeling, waaroor reeds iets gesê is, betref wat ’n mens sou kon beskryf as die verskeidenheid vorme van skending of gewelddoening waaraan die mens onderworpe of skuldig is: oorlog, stadsbesoedeling, kolonialisering, verhoudingsverbrokkeling, seksuele uitlokking en uitspattigheid, verganklikheid en verval ... Hier en daar word hoop, liefde en selfs poësie en die musiek as teenvoeters hiervan gestel – al het dit dan net ’n vlietende uitwerking, soos reeds in die inleidende parodie op Breyten Breytenbach se “Allerliefste, ek stuur vir jou ’n rooiborsduif” gesuggereer word:

jy moet altyd weet, liefste, van my liefde
soos van vlerke wat oor jou flapper –
hoe vlug van hart tot hart dit is.

Die bundeltitle slaan dus op sowel die menslike doen en late as die menslike kondisie: hoofsaaklik ontluisterend deurtrek van paradokse en ironieë.

Afdelings vier en vyf sluit by die titelgewe aan deurdat dit gedigte bevat wat gebaseer is op antieke Sumeriese en Griekse mitologiese vertellings – daardie eg menslike voorstellings van onbegryplike natuurkragte en goddelike magte.

Vos se voortreflike benutting van die stylgrepe wat aan die begin van hierdie bespreking te berde gebring is, sorg dat hierdie mitologiese omsettings as ’t ware tuis kom in die Afrikaanse idioom, onder meer deur Bybelse uitdrukkings naatloos met die taal van die antieke ‘heidense’ geskrifte te verweef. Veral die digterlike bewerkings van stukke uit die Gilgamesj-epos (die “Uruk-fragmente”) verdien lof.

Volkome vry te spreek van kritiek is hierdie vierde bundel van Vos nié. Ek reken dat veral die twee mitologies geïnspireerde gedigte van afdeling vier dalk nog plekplek prosaïes en verstandelik aandoen – laasgenoemde omdat, soos meermale voorheen in Vos se oeuvre, te veel aanspraak gemaak word op die voorkennis van die leser. (Vandaar dat ’n relatief uitgebreide lys van verklarings, onder die hofie “Toegange”, aan die einde van die bundel verskyn.) Voorts sou vraagtekens oor enkele woord- en beeldkeuses geplaas kon word (hoe moet ’n mens jou byvoorbeeld voorstel dat ’n menselyf “verbrokkel [...] tot skerwe”?), terwyl die soort lompe woorddoortoligheid wat dikwels in Vos se vorige werk voorgekom het, ook nog die slot van die gedig “Marsias” ontsier:

Bloed benat die vrugbare aarde
wat ’n stroom van trane laat vloei
in donkerdiep donker ondergrondse are.

Die punte van (moontlike) kritiek weeg egter glad nie op teen die rykdom aan voor-treflikhede wat *Die afdruk van jou hande* kenmerk nie. Ook die uitgewer moet gelukge-wens word met 'n mooi hardebanduitgawe, kompleet met skutbladillustrasies én gehegte bladwyserlint om dit 'n 'klassieke' voorkoms te gee.

6

Trienke Laurie het met haar drie vorige bundels sedert 1997 veral verdienstelike by-draes gelewer tot die Afrikaanse natuur- en religieuse poësie, hoewel die intieme belydenisse van haar belewenisse rondom haar moeder se dood in *Uitroep* (2001) ook in 'n aantal aandoenlike verse gestalte gekry het.

Met *Sonskyf* bou sy voort op die natuur- en religietemas. Sy brei op laasgenoemde uit deur, in die afdelings "Songod" en "Soveel onder die son", aspekte van die an-tieke Egiptiese en die tradisionele inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis, gods-dienste, mitologieë en kulture te betrek. Soos in haar vorige bundels word wetenskap-like en kulturele kennis eintlik in diens gestel van die religieuse beleving, waar beide soorte kennis, veral tesame, 'n sin vir die wonderbaarlike moet stimuleer. Die bundelitelkeuse hang hiermee saam. Die religieuse inhoud van dié woord word uit die gedig "Die eenman-god" duidelik:

[...]

Amenophis kies Aton, die sonskyf,
om die goddelikheid te omskryf.
Hy hernoem homself Achnaton:
Hy wat die son dien – die hemelskyf
wat so blink van heerlijkheid [...]

Laurie demonstreer sodoende, op die spoor van iemand soos T. T. Cloete, dat kennis die estetiese ervaring kan verryk en verhewig. 'n Toon van verkneukeling kenmerk derhalwe dikwels die uitbeelding van die dinge, byvoorbeeld in die openingsafde-ling "Sonbesie" met sy gedigte oor fauna en flora. Laurie se kommer oor die impak van die mens se bedrywighede en leefwyse op die natuur tree ook in hierdie afdeling na vore, byvoorbeeld in die volgende gedig:

Ertjiesop

Vandag lyk die see pure snert,
dik van dweil wees,
van poetsvrou wees
– deurmekaar geskommel –
verstop met
tandeborsels en 'n gebreekte kam

uit riole gestort,
'n stukkende bak van plastiek,
'n koeldrankblik met strooitjie,
vislyn wat meeu en seeskilpad verstrik.
Sy frommel die rommel in 'n ballas,
tjorts dit peristalties
golf na golf terug na die strand.
Sy proes met skuimende mond:
Dè, vat terug, hou julle stront!

Dit is meermale interessante stof waarmee Laurie werk, maar sy gaan ongelukkig selde werklik nuut- of wonderbaarlikmakend daarmee om. Té dikwels, méér nog as in haar vorige werk, steek die benutting van die natuur- en kultuurhistoriese kennis in hierdie nuwe bundel van haar vas in anekdotisme of inligtingsoordrag; of doen sulke verse lerend en lesingagtig aan, selfs (afgesaag) moraliserend. Laasgenoemde blyk veral uit die twee afdelings waarin die religieuse beleving duidelik voorop staan, naamlik "Songod" en "Sonkolom". Daarby is die styl dan alte prosaïes-retories. Vergelyk maar net die slotstrofe van "Luther": "Toe een aand by die lanternlig / snap hy opeens: Paulus praat / van die geregtigheid van God. / Christus gee aan jou die reg, besleg jou saak met Hom. / Sonder weeg of afmeet vergewe Hy: / die uitgediende py word afgerol, / jy word bedek met nuutwit wol."

Die ander kant van die verslete munt is dat Laurie in haar verkneukeling oor die natuurdinge, of by die aanskoue van die skeepswrakke (uitgebou tot beelde van menslike nietigheid voor die natuurkragte) in sekere van die gedigte in die afdeling "Roes", haar besondig aan uitspattige klank-, woord- en beeldspel. Die resultate is dan dikwels bombasme (meermale benadruk met retoriese vrae en uitroepe) en sintaktiese en beeldtroebelhede.

Nee, *Sonskyf* is nie 'n toevoeging mét gehaltegroei tot Laurie se oeuvre nie; intendeel. Net enkele kere nader sy die beheersde en treffende sprekendheid van die beste werk uit haar vorige bundels, byvoorbeeld in 'n gedig soos die volgende uit die kunsbeskoulike afdeling "Lens":

Siek windhond

Na 'n Griekse beeldhouwerk

Téén die geïdealiseerde beeld
van die klassieke tydperk,
met kurwes perfek gerond
en spiere gesond en bultend,
reageer laat-Helleense kunstenaars
en teken of beeldhou aan die werklikheid getrou

by uitstek die onmoëie – 'n bejaarde
vol ploëie – vertolk selfs die verwronge.

Tog, juis in die leepoë
van die siek windhond –
die uitsteekribbes,
die traag opgeligte voorpoot,
die agterpote wat hoekig vanuit skraal heupe stoot –
uit die hond se ganse houding
smeeke daar iets, tjank daar
'n tjank van 200 voor Christus
tot nou.

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Marius Crous Review article

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Three diverse collections

A secret burden. Memories of the Border War by South African soldiers who fought in it.

Karen Batley (ed.). Johannesburg, Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers. 133 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-86842-290-6.

Lush. Poems for four voices.

Haidee Kruger. 2007. Pretoria: Protea Book House. 64 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86919-205-1.

Against the light.

Charl-Pierre Naudé. 2007. Pretoria: Protea Book House. 131 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86919-184-9.

This review looks at three diverse collections of poetry – all published in the same year. They differ ideologically, poetically and stylistically and each text provides the reader with its own unique perspective, which I try and elicit in my discussion.

1

In her collection, Batley focuses on a neglected aspect of the South African literary tradition, namely the horrors experienced by young, white conscripts during the so-called Border War of the 1980s. Just like America with its legacy of the Vietnam War, present and future South African (and Namibian) generations will have to deal with the aftermath of this war.

From the texts it is evident that these young conscripts were forced into a situation over which they had no control. They were dumped in an inhospitable, strange and harsh landscape where they, as teenagers, were subjected to the brutal realities of death and killing on a daily basis. Fed an ideology of propaganda and religion, they had to view people as the enemy and as the Other, only to learn later that South Africa had contributed some R5 million towards Namibia's independence celebrations.

There are several poignant lines in this collection that convey the inner turmoil and the emotional experiences of the soldiers, but for the sake of this discussion, I have opted for the following: "You've got two souls, an army soul and this one" (107). "[T]his one" refers to politeness, good manners and civility and the conduct drummed

into these young men while they were still civilians, whereas the border demanded that they forget everything at once. Here civility and morality have to make way for an almost animal-like instinct to kill (or to be killed): "To kill is not that hard / it is a frame of mind" (70). One's existence is filled with imagery of abjection: death, decay, vomit, blood trickling into the sand, skulls and pain. One of the authors still now in civilian life associates the disinfectant Lysol with dead bodies (123).

As young 18-year-olds they were dumped into a landscape devoid of colour. In this regard one can compare the opening lines of the poem "We never loved this Namibia" (88):

We never loved this Namibia.
Its hot white sand burnt
our feet through our boots.

Or elsewhere in "Colour" (112):

You don't see any colour for all those months. You see brown and that's it. The only yellow you see might be in your rat pack. Just brown, nothing else ... I think of the psychological influence of colour and scent – the absence of those things is unbearable. And the first thing you see when you come out is colour.

Under these conditions there is a strong sense of camaraderie amongst the soldiers. They bond to protect, support and console one another. This often means that a medical officer has to stitch up his buddy or put him in a body bag for his final journey. "Casevacs" (the title refers to casualty evacuations, 78–84) contains the reminiscences of a medical officer and the title refers to the evacuation of the injured or the dead, flown in by helicopter. He evokes the experiences of one such incident as follows: "Now you have to work with this body. You have to undress him, plug him up, clean him and put him in a body bag. The first time you stand there and think – did this guy think when he got dressed this morning, that this evening some medic would take off his boots and socks for him and then undress him?" (80). The body is reduced to an othered, abject object that tells of the loss of humaneness in times of war.

One way in which the body can react to all of this is to relive the traumatic experiences in dreams and nightmares. Even when he is back in civilian life, there is always some form of survivor's guilt lurking in the soldier's mind: "You don't care about anybody's life because you've seen so many spillages" (104).

The lives of the soldiers are characterised by a strong sense of the illogical and the absurd: For them going to this war seems futile and then they discover condensed milk bearing a label, "To Swapo with love from Abba" (46). Or when, after six weeks of living on rations, they are suddenly given meat for a braai in the middle of a rain-storm (37) – or to hear that the government, for which they have risked their lives in

war, had given money towards Namibia's independence – to mention but a few examples.

This collection of texts by conscripts of the former SADF is indeed a welcome addition to the existing corpus of war literature. It not only calls for comparison with the Vietnam experience of the American soldiers, but it provides a welcome addition to the historical narrative of this country. Not all conscripts were trigger-happy adventurers in search of someone to kill or some bounty hunting youths undergoing a rite of passage. There was indeed a questioning of events but it was censored and silenced (as the title of the collection suggests) at the time. But, as the honourable Justice Yvonne Mokgoro writes in her foreword: "Perhaps the time for unburdening has come, and for people to confront the war and its lingering effects." Hopefully this would result in similar research into the heart of darkness of South African history.

2

Completely different in focus and scope to that of Batley, is Haidee Kruger's first collection of poems. Where, in Batley's case we have been in the realm of masculinity and masculine energy, in this collection we enter the world of Agnes, Dorothy, Gertrude and Brigid – the protagonists in these "poems for four voices". Two choruses frame the four sections and as is practice, the first chorus introduces us to the characters in the poems to follow. It is the domain of the feminine and it is reflected in the language. We do not have the almost-factual and descriptive type of writing that is found in Batley's collection.

Throughout the collection there is a predilection for metaphors of growth, development and a strong bodily awareness, underpinned by the cover design and the drawings of nude women at the start of each of the section. The first poem in the Agnes section deals with the notion of "ready for planting" (10) and the seduction "of the seed moving against/ the tongue" (10). But planting, growth and fecundity is also associated with the creative process and throughout the text we find examples of a strong metafictional awareness and bodies held captive by "adverbial corsets" (29). Brigid Eight (59) is a good example of such a metafictional poem dealing with the girl trying to find her poetic voice with:

a blunt pencil between
her fingers and
the self-inflicted
unpoetic scars of
paper cuts across
her wrists.

Other themes examined by Kruger are a bodily awareness, a celebration of self and the experiencing of love. The poet also explores the traditional subject positions of women, namely that of virgin or Madonna, whore and mother. There is a strong emphasis on the virginal, the contemplative nun and the notion of virginal soil that still needs to grow. But we also learn from *Agnes Five* (17) that little girls are made of “sugar & spice / & poison & dice”, which immediately suggests that the females portrayed here are not all docile, subservient and mere objects of beauty. I must admit that I felt there could have been more poems dealing with the poison & dice in this collection.

Furthermore, the poet also explores the subject of Eve and her concomitant ideological position within feminist politics. As is the case with Ted Hughes, for example, we have a reinterpretation of the myth of the apple:

and by the way
eve sends her regards from
somewhere beyond the great
apple of which
you too
have bitten off more
than you can
chew ... (20).

Several literary allusions are also included and one recognises the intertextual reference to Sylvia Plath in the poem “*Dorothy nine*” (33). There are also references to Eliot and even to Derrida (30).

My main point of criticism against the poems in the collection relates to the title: the poems abound with imagery and metaphorical expression and a sense of lavish opulence but there is no sense of closure in these poems. Often the poems are nothing more than chains of metaphors and expressions that result in nothing, and the poem tends to “[hang] by a paradigmatic thread” (13). “*Dorothy three*” (25), for instance, is nothing more than an extended metaphor:

after

you retreat
like a door swinging shut &

i watch
the oblique panes of your
back folding white squares of silence
as my fingertips mutely
try to pick

your locks[.]

Charl-Pierre Naudé received the M-Net Prize for Afrikaans Poetry and the Protea Prize for Poetry in 2005 for his collection, *In die geheim van die dag*. He subsequently translated the poems in that collection and they are the ones included in *Against the light*. In the translated collection (the one under discussion here) he has altered the sequence the poems originally had in Afrikaans, and as he has indicated in an interview, he did so in order to tell a different story (Crous 2008). The lyrical poems were shifted towards the end of the collection and poems dealing with issues more pressing to him at present were put at the start of the collection.

The cover image portrays a bare-chested woman holding a rifle but her face is hidden behind a veil of hair. Behind her the sky is overcast and covered in stormy, grey clouds. This not only suggests a preoccupation with the female body, but also with immediate danger – and of course, one asks why the semi-nude figure is carrying a gun. Perhaps it is preparing us, for we do meet two dangerous women in “Two thieves” (17) or the eerie young woman at the foreign correspondents’ banquet? (33).

A sharp-witted poem such as “How I got my name” (54) also becomes a concise history of colonisation, a theme that is recurring in the book of poems. The practice of naming is central to the colonial project and it is often alleged that places did not exist until the colonials named them. Or as the poet puts it:

Giving a name to another is an act of Love.
 (A ruthless act of subjugation too,
 which we’ll leave unprobed for now.)

Several poems make mention of Livingstone (46) and there is even reference to the geological history of Gondwanaland.

A poem such as “The mercenary” (47) calls to mind Batley’s collection and also comments on the futility of war and the disillusionment that set in after countries became independent. In “The visitor” (50) the speaker sets out to visit the southern part of Namibia where he relives the Griqua past of the area through his encounter with a ghost. From this poem we learn that the heroic Jan Smuts bombed the Griqua people in 1922.

One of the best poems in the collection is undoubtedly “Vampires” (123) which deals with an incidence of vampirism in Malawi and how the government supposedly (albeit in an absurd manner) responds to the crisis. Compare for instance how the omnipresence of death is depicted in this stanza:

A graveyard with candles flickers like a birthday
 cake.
 A wedding, with only one partner at the pulpit:
 a skeleton of a girl up to her ears in love
 with *her* vampire, a bridegroom in absentia.

The poems have long lines (up to 20 syllables per line) and are mostly written in the form of a narrative or a short story-type of poem. The inherent danger with such poems is usually that they might read like prose chopped-up into verses and lines. Compare for instance the opening of the poem, "Here and now" (93):

The American Clayton Eshleman
tells an odd story
about his years as a young teacher
in Japan translating the Peruvian
Vallejo into English.

(Incidentally I know that Naudé is translating Vallejo into Afrikaans, so one wonders how much of that has rubbed off on him.)

What I enjoy most about this collection of poetry is the refreshing tone, the interesting juxtaposition of words and metaphors and the brutally honest way of commenting on issues. An example of this is the unusual "She has a long bridal train, white, and humbly calls herself toilet paper" (20).

This collection of translated poems is indeed to be welcomed in a time when more and more Afrikaans poets' works are rendered into English, for example, that of Krog and Stockenström. It not only reaches a larger audience but it also results in Afrikaans participating in the global poetic discussion.

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Review article

Can new histories be written objectively by old historians?

New History of South Africa.

Hermann Giliomee & Bernard Mbenga. 2007. Cape Town: Tafelberg. 454 pp.
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What is a 'new' history? When is a history 'new', and who decides what is no longer 'old'? With a volume intended for general readership, splitting hairs like this is perhaps a little unfair, for the adjective is probably just what that general reader will assume it is: a signifier that this is a history of the beloved country for the 'new', democratic, South Africa as opposed to a history for (rather than 'of') the 'old', pre-democratic, now not-so-beloved apartheid state. A history, then (as the Introduction states clearly) that eschews the earlier tendency to begin in 1652 with some form of *terra nulla*. But as the Introduction also points out, the excellent *Oxford History of South Africa* of 1969–71 (still a good read today) had already extended South African history into – well, South African pre-history. Since the *Oxford History* was an 'Oxford' history, however, not a 'South African' history, I suppose it would count as (at best) 'pre-new', rather than 'new'. Nor is the Giliomee-Mbenga the first 'new history' of South Africa, as there was one over twenty years ago, by Trehwella Cameron and Stephanus Spies (which I suppose we'd then have to classify as 'post-pre-new'; but let's not get too carried away by all this).

So what makes this *New History* new? Well, the fact that it has one black and one white editor, for a start; and one suspects that it would not have been published (at least not as 'New'), were this not the case. As the Introduction states, the *New History* draws on the 'revisionist' historical work of the past three decades and the reinterpretations of such events as the Mfecane, the Anglo-Boer Wars and the role played in the Second of the latter by blacks, coloureds, Indians and the San; it rightly aims to "redress past distortions and biases". To sum it up: "Our goal has been to present our history in all its complexity in a fair and balanced manner" (x).

How successful have the editors been in that goal? On the whole, remarkably so, for the first two-thirds of the book at least. It is elegantly produced, with many illus-

trations (black and white plus colour), and as a historian hitherto better versed in the modern than in the old, the present writer has learnt a lot from it. To be sure, there is much that will be familiar to readers from other sources, not least Giliomee's own *Afrikaners*, and as the Introduction also admits, the book as a whole "rests to a large extent on previous published work by the different contributors" (x). While anyone can quibble about this or that being left out (there was some displeasure in the *Afrikaans* press a few months ago at the treatment of the early years from 1652 on, for example), any concise telling worth its salt is going to displease everyone in some small way. What really counts in a book such as this is whether or not the resultant narrative comes across as fair and representative. And for much of the time, this book succeeds. The complex history of early South Africa, of its many immigrants from different places, the importance of slavery, the conflict between Boer and Brit after the arrival of the latter, the impact of the missionaries, the emergence of the various nationalisms – all this makes for a darned good read. Perhaps surprisingly, certain key Afrikaner figures do not get the prominence one might expect (such as President Steyn of the Orange Free State). But again, a history of less than 500 pages can't satisfy everyone. And one is simply reminded that it's high time that we get decent biographies of men such as Steyn and Kruger (Giliomee is not alone in having in recent times argued, rightly, for a re-evaluation of Kruger; yet one must not forget that there are in fact hardly any reliable biographies of *any* leading South African political figures). The book barely touches on cultural issues, however, restricting itself (intentionally) to the political and, to a degree, the economic fields. But it is a real shame. This was a missed opportunity to bring a spotlight to bear on general issues of art, literature and music in a manner that would have been of benefit to the layman.

There are, however, a few more specific questions that this *New History* raises. One is: just how much was written by whom? While the dust jacket proudly announces that the book is the work of "31 of South Africa's foremost historians", the list on page [v] makes it clear that some of them wrote very little indeed, and it also mentions more than once that "Hermann Giliomee wrote the rest" of certain chapters. (In fact, there seem to have been 32 authors; Annette Giliomee wrote a section in Chapter Two, but is omitted from the tally of contributors at the end of the book).

It would be interesting to know precisely how much of the book was written and or edited by Giliomee alone. Not least because the latter part of it – for which Giliomee was apparently the prime author (e.g. "... of the rest of the material in the three chapters of Part Four") – seems to reflect certain revisionist tendencies apparent in Giliomee's own writings of the past few years. Elsewhere, for example, he has argued that apartheid should be regarded as "a modernised form of both paternalism and trusteeship, on the one hand and, on the other, elements of liberal ideology not used by segregationists", whose "most sophisticated version [was] espoused first by N. P. van Wyk Louw and G. B. Gerdener" (Giliomee 2003: 373). In the *New History* too, as in

the article just quoted, there is an endeavour to portray apartheid as part of a historical continuum of segregation.

This brings about an interesting interpretation of Verwoerd. His “most significant contribution [...] [in the development of apartheid as a form of decolonization] was to help whites think about race in terms other than biological superiority/inferiority and to present the problem as a political problem where different ethnic groups had to find a way to co-exist” (345). We are also told that Verwoerd’s policies “fell far short of his earlier promise” (345), though precisely what that promise was remains nebulous. And it is implied that his later promise, too, remained unfulfilled: thus his discussions with Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961 offered him “a unique opportunity [...] to develop a plan that could gather sufficient international support for the ‘decolonisation’ of South Africa. But tragically Hammarskjöld was killed a few months later in a plane accident” (340; since it is now a matter of debate that the ‘accident’ might in fact have been planned by the South African authorities themselves, this naturally puts that ‘unique opportunity’ in a different light). When Verwoerd was assassinated, we are further told, “he was to make a speech that was said to have contained important policy announcements” (345). Yet another Verwoerdian opportunity of which South Africa, it is implied, was robbed by fate.

Verwoerd’s assassin, the *New History* tells us, was a “white parliamentary messenger Dimitrio Tsafendas”, who “was later found by a court to be deranged” (345). But he was not white (which we all should know, at least since Henk van Woerden’s *Mouthful of Glass*); he was of mixed race. And while the poor fellow by all accounts did have his problems upstairs, it is noteworthy that Verwoerd’s unsuccessful assassin of 1960, David Pratt, was according to the *New History* also “a mentally deranged white man” (336). As Oscar Wilde might have said, to be the victim of one deranged white man is unfortunate, but to be the victim of two smacks of carelessness. It’s almost as if a wish to rid the world of Verwoerd were by definition the prerogative of deranged whites. But in this context, regardless of the mental state of the perpetrator (and without wishing to justify any act of killing), would not ‘tyrannicide’ be a more accurate term than ‘assassination’?

Apartheid’s possible origins in Nazi ideology are also disputed here. Thus, “There is no evidence that [Verwoerd] was influenced by Nazi racial ideology” (314). Situating the birth of apartheid as much in the thinking of a man such as N. P. van Wyk Louw, as Giliomee does elsewhere (see above) also inevitably serves to disassociate it from crass ideologists. We are told in the *New History* that the National Party in the 1930s and ‘40s “was not in any significant way influenced by the far right” (300). While the Nazi affiliations of Nico Diederichs, Piet Meyer and others is not hidden here, their names receive barely a mention in the book (Meyer only once), while Geoffrey Cronjé, perhaps best known today thanks to J. M. Coetzee’s decade-old essay on him, receives not a mention at all. This effort to move apartheid into the historical

mainstream, which involves a shift in blame towards respected men such as van Wyk Louw, could in theory lead to a broadening of culpability (Daniel Goldhagen here we come?). But instead, it seems coupled with an endeavour to portray the loony right as peripheral, which they were not. Then there is the attempt to paint Verwoerd as a mistaken intellectual who should perhaps be compared to the likes of de Gaulle rather than, say, a Saddam Hussein. Giliomee (in Brand) has discussed both these comparisons before, but finds the latter an 'absurdity', pointing out that, under Verwoerd, "in die selle het presies drie mense in aanhouding gesterf". But by mentioning the comparison merely to dismiss it, Giliomee to my mind reinforces its validity. To take recorded deaths in police cells as one's prime criterion for proof of evil intent is surely itself an absurdity. So is the table given in the *New History* on page 398 listing "deaths in ethnic conflicts" worldwide, with Cambodia with the most at the top and South Africa with the fewest at the bottom, below Northern Ireland (I must remember to tell my Northern Irish friends how much better their lives would have been, had they been born black in South Africa instead). Consider South Africa's millions of blighted lives, the hundreds of thousands uprooted, the disregard for life and limb of millions of citizens, all to promote the well-being of a racial élite – and then the comparisons of Verwoerd with the nastiest leaders of the 20th century no longer seem so invalid. Similarly, to claim that there is 'no evidence' of the influence of Nazi thought on Verwoerd is too glib: this is a topic that really needs further investigation. To be sure, while the German universities he studied at in the mid-1920s were hardly dominated by left-wing intellectuals, and while his sometime colleagues, at least in Leipzig, included men who became prominent supporters of the post-1933 university order, this does not prove anything conclusive about Verwoerd himself. However, the fact that his first editorial in the *Transvaler* in 1937 was rabidly anti-Jewish suggests that German fascism had not left him cold. The lack of Nazi phraseology in National Party statements after the Second World War is proof only that they, too, had realized that racial supremacy had acquired a bad press worldwide. The simple fact is that Nazi-influenced men such as Piet Meyer (who did not even shave off his Hitler moustache after 1945), Geoff Cronjé, B. J. Vorster and Nico Diederichs were not an idiotic fringe of minor importance, but mainstream players, both in the establishment of the apartheid state, and in the running of it for some three decades (a glance at Cronjé's obituary [see Pieterse 1993], for example, with its lists of the committees on which he served and the honorary doctorates he was awarded, allays any suspicion that he had somehow been sidelined after the 1940s). To read the writings of Diederichs, Meyer, Cronjé and others is not just uncomfortable (as Coetzee has noted, for example, Cronjé had an obsession with black men's sperm). It also pushes one to an interpretation of apartheid as something more than a 'mere' continuation of segregation. It is all very well, for example, to tell us that Bantu Education was "an attempt to provide mass education for an industrialising economy" and that it "made for a

definite improvement in mass literacy" (319), implying that apartheid in fact brought some good with it; but the notion of mother-tongue large-scale basic education for blacks was in fact just another means of subjugation. Its aim was not to uplift, but to ensure that the black population was on the one hand deprived of the English missionary schools that had produced the black intellectual élite of the mid-20th century, and on the other hand removed from the possibility of any political/cultural assimilation into the English-speaking population.

In his article for the *Sunday Times* of 21 November 2004 condemning the suggestion that Bram Fischer should be awarded an honorary doctorate by Stellenbosch, Giliomee wrote that the reasons given by the university "violate the most basic rules of historical understanding – always judge people within their own historical context and never project today's political values on to the past". I would agree with his premise up to a point – for a historian's task (as I'm sure Giliomee would admit) is also to make informed decisions with the benefit, however dubious it may be, of hindsight. But in fact, in its treatment of apartheid the *New History* itself violates those 'most basic rules'. For the historical context in which apartheid was created was shaped by the post-1945 knowledge of what happens when a state raises racist supremacist thinking to its key ideology, makes marriage and sex between the races punishable by law, deprives those who are supposedly of inferior race of their citizenship and of their basic rights, separates the men from their womenfolk, and puts them to work for the economic benefit of a racial élite, with little concern as to whether they perish in the process. To claim then that apartheid was merely another form of segregation just does not figure – such an assertion is at best intellectual sleight of hand, at worst sophistry.

The revisionism of the *New History*, however, does not stop here. It mentions the UN's declaration that apartheid was a 'crime against humanity', but adds that South Africa "was unable to get any country to intercede on its behalf as the United States did on behalf of Israel when it successfully pushed for the removal of the reference to Zionism as a crime against humanity" (359). Whatever one's views on the current parlous state of the Palestinians, a statement such as this cannot but leave a nasty taste in one's mouth. And when it comes to Mandela, we are told that in the 1950s he "deliberately assumed a messianic role" (332), and that the ANC helped "to develop the messianic status of its leaders, especially Chief Albert Luthuli [...] and Nelson Mandela" (328), while as President, "Mandela may have helped to foster the venality that has become so conspicuous in South African public life. He included in his administration individuals with an established record of venality" (417). Apart from the strange, implicit assertion that venality is a post-1994 invention in South Africa, how many times do we have to read the words 'messianic' and 'venal' to get the message? And why use them specifically for Mandela? A time will surely come when his halo will not shine as brightly as today; that is the fate of all significant leaders. But

while the *New History* also lists Mandela's obvious achievements, just as it also openly states the "gross harm and humiliation" caused by Verwoerd's policies, by describing the latter as a "brilliant" intellectual, but Mandela as a "messianic" individual "fostering venality", it goes a revisionist bridge too far.

Then there is the matter of the TRC. Its "composition was hardly balanced [...] almost all members were considered to be tacit or overt ANC supporters [...] the level of corroboration of the victims' evidence was not high [...] hearsay evidence was [allowed] [...] the result was decidedly mixed" (413–4). But this is to confuse victims and perpetrators. Since Giliomee and the *New History* seem to like comparisons (if only, at times, to stress how they don't like them), let's offer one ourselves, if an extreme one: By the same token, the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal must have been biased, because it did not have any Nazis amongst the judges. Would any sane historian today argue such a thing?

I do not wish to suggest that the *New History* is a work beholden to some pseudo-NP agenda. It incorporates much worthwhile scholarship, there is much fairness in it (in the first two-thirds of the book), and there is certainly no attempt in it to claim that apartheid was a good thing. However, we have here concentrated on the apartheid chapters because, under the guise of a coffee-table 'general history' intended for a broad (presumably also international) readership, the editors are engaged in a process of relativising what should not be relativised, and on revising what is not worthy of revision. This leaves the book as a whole a very mixed bag. In the 1980s in Germany, the so-called *Historikerstreit* debated the extent to which the Holocaust should be regarded as a unique event in history. To outsiders, it seemed at the time (and still can) an oddly Germanic insistence on splitting historical hairs about a crime too enormous for the rest of us to contemplate. But it was also about something very fundamental: about resisting the temptation to relativise Evil. Perhaps it's time for South Africa to have its own *Historikerstreit* about apartheid. Perhaps, in twenty years or so, we might even reach a point where those Daniel Goldhagen-like questions of general complicity in apartheid can be asked (as they probably should), even if they might never be answered satisfactorily. But for the moment, we can suffice ourselves with a simple question: to what extent can new histories be written objectively by old historians?

Works cited

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