A Return to the Picturesque: Reading the Landscape in Lettie Viljoen's[1] *Landskap met vroue en slang*

Thys Human

Summary

In *Landskap met vroue en slang* (*Landscape with Women and Snake)* (1996) – the last novel published under Ingrid Winterbach's pseudonym Lettie Viljoen – the main character, Lena Bergh, relocates with her husband from Stellenbosch to Durban. As a result she suddenly finds herself in a lush, subtropical landscape that does not inspire her as a visual artist, but rather confuses and overwhelms her. Because of her psychological discontent, Lena deeply yearns for the familiar, soothing landscape of the Western Cape that she had to leave behind. She becomes so obsessed with her past in the Cape that she cannot succeed in continuing her life (or role as artist) in Durban with enthusiasm. One thing that stimulates Lena's interest, however, is the reading she does of the so-called *sublime landscapes* of the Baroque painter, Nicolas Poussin, especially his landscape cycle "The Four Seasons" (1660-1664). This article investigates the relationship between Lena's obsession with the past, the problems she is experiencing in adapting to the subtropical coastal landscape of Durban and the loss of creative focus and inspiration that she experiences as visual artist. Specific attention is given to the way in which Lena's reading of the so-called *sublime landscape* – and especially the pictorial and compositional aspects of Poussin's landscapes – eventually enables her to observe the surrounding landscape in a new way and to get a certain (artistic)

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1. In her first five novels the novelist and artist Ingrid Winterbach used the pseudonym Lettie Viljoen. Winterbach has been described by critics as "one of the most original novelists" (Viljoen 2007: Cover Review), "one of the most interesting writers in Afrikaans" (Krog 2005: Cover Review) and as "an essential voice" (Krog 2007: Cover Review). She has been honoured with numerous awards, including the M-Net Book Prize (1994 & 2007), the Old Mutual Literary Prize (1997), the W.A. Hofmeyer Prize (2000 & 2007), the Hertzog Prize (2004) and the UJ Creative Writing Prize (2007). Yet she remarks in an interview (de Vries 2007) that her work has largely gone unnoticed by most English-speaking readers. The translation into English of *Karolina Ferreira* (*The Elusive Moth*, 2005), *Niggie* (*To Hell with Cronjé*, 2007) and *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* (*The Book of Happenstance,* 2008) will hopefully change this, however.

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grip on it. Finally, it is indicated that the picturesque principles suggested by Poussin's landscape cycle do not only afford Lena the visual apparatus to appreciate the surrounding Natal landscape, but also offer the reader of Viljoen's text certain artistic principles according to which the novel can be read and interpreted *as sublime landscape*.

Opsomming

In *Landskap met vroue en slang* (1996) – die laaste roman wat onder Ingrid Winterbach se skuilnaam Lettie Viljoen gepubliseer is – verhuis die hoofkarakter, Lena Bergh, saam met haar man vanaf Stellenbosch na Durban. Gevolglik bevind sy haarself in 'n welige, subtropiese landskap wat haar nie as visuele kunstenaar aanspreek of inspireer nie. Vanweë haar psigiese onbehae, hunker sy na die gerusstellende bekendheid van die Wes-Kaapse landskap wat sy moes agterlaat. Sy raak tot so 'n mate met haar verlede in die Wes-Kaap behep dat sy nie in staat is om haar lewe – en rol as kunstenaar – in Durban met entoesiasme voort te sit nie. Lena se belangstelling word wel geprikkel deur die leeswerk wat sy oor die sogenaamde *sublieme landskappe* van die Barokskilder Nicolas Poussin, en veral sy landskap-siklus *Die vier seisoene* (1660-1664) doen. In dié artikel word ondersoek ingestel na die verband tussen Lena se beheptheid met die verlede; die probleme wat sy ervaar om in die subtropiese kuslandskap van Durban aan te pas en die verlies aan kreatiewe fokus en skildersinspirasie wat sy ervaar. Aandag word veral gegee aan die wyse waarop Lena se interpretasie van die sogenaamde *sublieme landskap* – en veral die skilderagtige en komposisionele aspekte van Poussin se landskapskilderye – haar uiteindelik in staat stel om op 'n nuwe wyse na haar omringende ruimte te kyk en 'n bepaalde greep op die geilheid en oordaad daarvan te kry. Ten slotte word aangetoon dat die skilderagtige beginsels van Poussin se landskapsiklus nie net vir Lena voorsien van 'n visuele perspektief waarvolgens sy die omringende landskap kan waarneem nie, maar die leser van die roman ook toerus met bepaalde artistieke uitgangspunte aan die hand waarvan dit gelees en geïnterpreteer kan word *as sublieme landskap*.

From the Soothing Blue Landscape of the Peninsula to the Subtropical Chaos of Durban

Lena Bergh, the protagonist in *Landskap met vroue en slang* (*Landscape with Women and Snake*), is a visual artist that relocates with her husband, Jack de Leeuw, from Stellenbosch to Durban. After an acrimonious divorce (from her first husband) and the sudden death of her father, one would expect Lena to be excited, if not anxious, to start a new life elsewhere with her second husband. It soon becomes clear, however, that she is battling to adapt to her life in suburban Berea. Lena is what Coetzee (1988: 38) calls "an enthusiast of landscape",[2] that is to say an observer who views terrain as

2. Initially used in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to refer to the work of the Dutch *landschap* painters, "landskip" and then "landscape" were terms used to refer to scenic representations and then to a particular scene or scenery in general. Therefore *landscape* refers to a specific

a potential subject of painting, and whose observation of terrain is in turn educated by her experience of painting. For example, Lena remarks the following about the tonality of the subtropical landscape that surrounds her:

> Groen is hier die norm. Groen is die konteks. Groen is nie een van Lena se gunstelingkleure nie. Sy het 'n voorkeur vir warm kleure: vir lewerrrooie en alisarienpienke; gryspienke, grys- en Napelsgele. Groen in kombinasie met rooi sou sy nie by voorkeur vir haar werk gebruik nie. Die spektrum van kleure hier, die kombinasies van groene, gele en rooie, vind sy onsubtiel. Sy moet die groen aanvaar, of sy moet dit vertaal. Sy kan haar daaraan oorgee, of sy kan dit vertaal na iets wat dit nie is nie. Sy kan in swart en wit werk, soos sy deesdae doen.
>
> (Viljoen 1996: 173)[3]
>
> (Here green is the norm. Green is the context. Green is not one of Lena's favourite colours. She has a preference for warm colours: for liver reds and alizarin pinks, grey-pinks, grey- and Naples yellows. By choice she would not use green in combination with red in her artworks. The spectrum of colours, the combinations of greens, yellows, and reds, lacks subtlety. She has to accept the green, or she has to translate it into something it is not. She could work in black and white, as she does these days.)

Lena therefore experiences a decline in focus and inspiration, on the one hand because she finds the surrounding landscape overwhelming, confusing and uninspiring, and on the other, because she is paralysed by an obsessive yearning for the more familiar (and "soothing") landscape of the Western Cape. The sheer abundance of the coastal landscape of Durban impedes her observations:

> Wanneer Lena oor haar linkerskouer by die venster van haar werkkamer uitkyk, word haar uitsig op ongeveer honderd meter deur bome belemmer – hoofsaaklik mango-, palm- en papajabome. Alles is hoofsaaklik groen om haar. Deur die digte lower is die huise aan die oorkant van die klein vallei

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perspective on a natural space and relates to the meaning that is ascribed to this space, as well as to the way in which the attribution of meaning takes place. In an aesthetic context, "landscape is a portion (better, a *stretch*) of land as viewed from some distance, usually with a foreground but almost always with a midground and background – the three key focal points of our binocular vision" (Crawford 2004: 256). According to Ogden & Ogden (1955: 266) the word *landscape* was first published in English in a translation of Giovanni Paolo Lamazzo's *Trattato dell'arte de la Pittura* in 1598, or possibly in an undated treatise on perspective at about the same time.

3. Subsequent references to *Landskap met vroue en slang* (*Landscape with Women and Snake*) will be indicated by page number(s) only.

net-net sigbaar. Die lug hier (in teenstelling tot die Wes-Kaap) is warm en dig, saamgepers tot 'n ongewoon hoë, broeiende konsentrasie en die aanwesigheid van tallose kruipende en vlieënde insekte. Die sensasie van beklemming, van 'n gebrek aan ruimte, het nie net te make daarmee dat die koepel van die hemel hier oënskynlik swaarder, drukkender op die aarde rus nie, maar met die gevoel dat daar 'n groter verskeidenheid uiteenlopende vorms en manifestasies van bewussyn om suurstof en leefruimte in hierdie troebel sop meeding.

(p. 39)

> (When Lena looks over her left shoulder through the studio window, her view is obstructed at about a hundred yards by trees – mainly mango, palm, and pawpaw trees. In the main everything around her is green. Through the dense foliage the houses on the far side of the small valley are barely visible. In contrast with the Western Cape the sky here is warm and thick, compressed to an unusually high, humid concentration and filled with countless crawling and flying insects. The sense of heaviness, the lack of space, results not only from the fact that the dome of the sky apparently rests heavier on the earth here, but also from the vast range of forms and manifestations of consciousness competing for oxygen and breathing-space in this muddy soup.)

Consequently Lena's vision becomes fragmented and she feels she is no longer in contact with the sources of her energy or rapture. While her perception of landscape is obstructed in suburban Natal, it is completely restored during a visit to the Western Cape:

> Want hier sien sy die ruimte nou met 'n helderheid of elke tree daarvan 'n waarneembare eenheid is. Hier is sy, dáár is die berg: tussen hulle lê die groot, glinstere, meetbare afstand.
>
> (p. 93)
>
> (Here she sees the expanse with such acuity as if each yard of it is a perceptible unit. Here she is, over there is the mountain: between them the vast, shimmering, measurable distance.)

Describing the view as planes of foreground, idle ground and far distance, with the mountain forming a *coulisse* (on the side), Lena follows pictorial principles – more specifically the tradition of the picturesque.[4]

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4. The word *picturesque* refers to physical landscape conceived of pictorially. Picturesque landscape is, in effect, landscape reconstituted in the eye of the imagination according to acquired principles of composition – usually in receding planes according to the Claudian scheme: "a dark *coulisse* on one side shadowing the foreground; a middle plane with a large central feature such as a clump of trees; a plane of luminous distance; perhaps an intermediate plane too between middle and far distance." (Coetzee 1988: 41; see also Andrews (1999: 19) and Viljoen (1998: 75). The ideally picturesque

The Tradition of the Picturesque

The picturesque mode facilitates an aesthetic appreciation of natural environments by focusing attention on the picture-like properties of sensuous surface and formal composition. Central to this approach is the concept of disinterestedness. The basic idea of disinterestedness is that "aesthetic appreciation requires appreciators to distance themselves from the object(s) of their appreciation as well as their own interests, such as the personal, the possessive, and the economic" (Carlson & Berleant 2004: 11). With the aid of disinterestedness, not only could domesticated, rural countrysides be seen as beautiful, but even the wildest of natural environments could be appreciated as sublime. Moreover, between the two extremes of the beautiful and the sublime, disinterestedness made space for the emergence of an even more powerful mode of landscape appreciation, the picturesque: "The upshot was an eighteenth century aesthetic synthesis having disinterestedness as the central theoretical concept, landscapes as the paradigm objects of aesthetic appreciation, and formalistic, picturesque appreciation as the favored mode of appreciation" (Carlson & Berleant 2004: 12). In the Aesthetics of Natural Environments Carlson & Berleant (2004: 12) argues that this eighteenth-century aesthetic synthesis does not come down to the present completely intact. Chief among the changes are (i) the ascendance of works of art and the decline of landscapes as paradigm objects of aesthetic appreciation, and (ii) the appreciation of nature "limited largely to the appreciation of those landscapes especially suited for disinterested, formalistic appreciation: scenic views with picture-like sensuous and formal properties" (2004: 12).

An important reason for Lena's initial despondency is her inability to view the lush, subtropical Natal landscape in terms of picturesque principles: she cannot detach and distance herself from the landscape, nor can she observe it objectively. At first she is under the impression that aesthetic appreciation of her new environment requires a new or completely different aesthetic paradigm. By means of regular strolls through parks and gardens in the city, conversations with friends (the ex-therapist and author, Mara Darboven, and the anarchistic poet and adventurer, Keet) and mentors (the Kafka-woman from Prague, Katarzyna Kedzierzawska, and the master from Hungary), as well as the reading she does on the sublime landscapes of Nicolas Poussin, she eventually comes to the realisation that the picturesque mode is by no means an outdated mode of aesthetic appreciation of natural environments

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view, Gilpin suggested, contained distant mountains, a lake in the middle distance, and a foreground of rocks, woods, broken ground, cascades, or ruins, this foreground to be characterised by "force and richness", by "roughness" of texture, in contrast to the "tenderness" of the middle and far ground (Clark 1945: 64; Noyes 1968: 11-17, 42; Watson 1970: 31; Barrell 1972: 21).

even though it has been viewed with growing scepticism during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In the 1960s Ronald Hepburn's article "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" (1966) almost single-handedly initiated a renewed interest in the aesthetics of nature. Almost all later philosophical work on the aesthetics of natural environments can be related to Hepburn's insights. Two initial developments can be distinguished. Each involves a reaction to one aspect of the old paradigm of the aesthetic appreciation as distanced contemplation of sensuous and formal properties, and each is foreshadowed by a central theme in Hepburn's seminal essay. On the one hand, there is the rejection of the old paradigm's exclusive focus on sensuous and formal properties and the pursuit of Hepburn's contention that the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world must be guided by our realisations about its real nature. On the other hand, there is a reaction against the traditional idea of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested, distanced contemplation and an endorsement of Hepburn's suggestion that, since it is not constrained by things such as designing intellects, art-historical traditions, and art-critical practices, the natural world facilitates an open, engaging, and creative mode of appreciation.

The former of the two initial developments stresses the role of the cognitive in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. The cognitive line of thought is developed more fully by Carlson (1979: 267-276) who maintains that aesthetic appreciation of nature must be freed from the archaic artistic approaches emphasising formalistic appreciation of isolated objects and picturesque appreciation of scenery. Moreover, he contends that freeing the appreciation of nature from artistic approaches necessitates neither reducing it simply to sensuous and emotional responses, nor abandoning it to superficial subjectivism. According to Carlson the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature must be cognitively informed by natural history and scientific understanding. Thus he finds a central place in the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world for the knowledge provided by sciences such as geology, biology, and ecology.

The latter of the initial philosophical developments in the aesthetics of nature involves a reaction against the traditional concept of aesthetic appreciation as disinterested contemplation and an endorsement of the idea that the natural environment facilitates an open, engaging, and creative mode of appreciation. In his 1992 article, "The Aesthetics of Art and Nature", Arnold Berleant addresses this issue by stressing the similarities between the appreciation of art and of nature. He rejects not only disinterestedness but also various other art-world-related dogmas that place art on a pedestal separating it from the world at large. Thus Berleant models the appreciation of art on the open, engaging, creative appreciation that is facilitated by the natural environment. He proposes what he terms an

"aesthetics of engagement" as the paradigm of the appreciation of both nature and art:

> [W]e cannot distance the natural world from ourselves in order to measure and judge it with complete objectivity. Nature exceeds the human mind. This is not just because the limitations of our present knowledge, and it is not only because of the essentially anthropomorphic character of that knowledge, which prevents us from ever going beyond the character and boundaries of our cognitive process. The ultimate limitlessness of nature comes from recognizing that the cognitive relation with things is not the exclusive relation or even the highest one we can achieve. The proper response to nature in this sense is awe, not just from its magnitude and power, but from the mystery that, as in a work of art, is part of the essential poetry of the natural world.
>
> (Berleant in Carlson & Berleant 2004: 82)

The reaffirmation of the role of artistic appreciative models, such as the traditions of landscape painting and picturesque appreciation, is developed more fully in essays by Ronald Moore and Donald Crawford Moore (1999: 42-60). Moore argues for a view he calls "Syncretic Aesthetics" and reaffirms various connections between the appreciation of nature and our experiences of art: "My claim is that we approach the qualities of things we think worthy of admiration in nature through lenses we have developed for thinking of aesthetic qualities at large" (Moore & Moore 2004: 216). In his essay, "Scenery and the Aesthetics of Nature" Crawford (2004: 253-268), investigates the relationships between the aesthetic appreciation of art and that of nature and reaffirms the significance of the legacy of the picturesque, defending the aesthetic appreciation of scenery as a proper form of aesthetic appreciation of nature: "The aesthetics of scenery is the aesthetics of the picturesque, in which one experiences nature's formal or surface features as if it were a design and thus judges it by reference to compositional aesthetic values that have their origin in the visual arts" (Crawford 2004: 259). With this remark he relates to the eighteenth-century view expressed by Uvedale Price:

> The use, therefore, of studying pictures, is not merely to make us acquainted with the combinations and effects that are contained in them, but to guide us, by means of those general heads (as they may be called) of composition, in our search of the numberless and untouched varieties and beauties of nature …. We may look upon pictures as a set of experiments of different ways in which trees, buildings, water, etc. may be disposed, grouped, and accompanied, in the most beautiful and striking manner.
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> (Price 1796: 4-5)

As a specific perspective on and interpretation of nature according to picturesque principles, any *landscape* is a type of "text" created by the

observer (in this instance Lena Bergh as visual artist). Conversely, the text with which the reader is confronted here – the novel *Landskap met vroue en slang* – is also a (textual) landscape, which is strikingly illustrated by the title of the novel and also by the numerous similarities that the text exhibits with Poussin's sublime landscape cycle. The picturesque principles suggested by Poussin's landscapes do not only afford Lena the compositional apparatus by means of which she can observe the surrounding Natal landscape, but also offer the reader of *Landskap met vroue en slang* certain artistic principles according to which the novel can be read and interpreted. This picturesque view is by no means a privileged, judgemental or authoritarian perspective with overt or implied colonial aims, however. (Lena's remarks regarding the landscape are clearly contrasted with those of the "Colonel" – a colonial explorer in southern Africa.)

Nicolas Poussin and the Sublime (Ideal) Landscape

According to Lagerlöf (1990: 17), the sublime landscape paintings of Nicolas Poussin, together with those of Annibale Carracci and Claude Lorrain, can be placed under the heading ideal landscapes.[5] As pictorial characteristics of the so-called ideal landscape, she mentions, among others: (i) ancient (and especially Biblical and mythological) subjects situated in antiquity; (ii) a rationally structured painting space that creates the idea of balance, harmony and order; (iii) the portrayal of nature as the co-creator of human action, subordinate to human morality; (iv) an interpretation of nature according to mysterious or irrational thought, or comprehended as a specific mood, and (v) the subordination of human figures to the imposing elements of nature: [M]an … never dominates the scene … but serves on the contrary as a foil to the grandeur of nature, which is the artist's veritable theme (Blunt 1967: 313).

An inherent characteristic common to all paintings of this type is a painting space in which the disappearing strata create the impression of depth: foreground, middleground and background are seen as a series of levels, parallel to the painting level, that are connected to each other by soft criss-cross diagonal lines. The framing sides are similarly structured to balance each other in symmetry or contrast and to leave the middle open for the "action". The two Poussin landscapes that appear on the cover of

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5. This equation is also evident in *Landskap met vroue en slang* – as illustrated by the first epigraph in the novel, as well as a thought expressed by Lena during a chance meeting with one of her former art mentors: "Later sou hulle by die sublieme landskap uitkom – van die landskap as slagveld na die ideale landskap beweeg" (p. 107) (Later they would arrive at the sublime landscape – [they would] move from the landscape as battleground to the ideal landscape.)

Viljoen's novel – "Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion" (1647) and "Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake" (1648) – may serve as examples here.

Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin64.html

Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin68.html

In "Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion", Poussin recounts the conclusion of a political tragedy in which the Athenian general Phocion, a nearly ideal man – military hero, pithy orator, and figure of moral rectitude – has been destroyed by foreign intrigue and mob rule. In the foreground Phocion's widow kneels with furtive movement and intense concern to gather her husband's ashes. Behind her, trees of magnificent beauty frame a deep vista that reveals a classic temple and other buildings. There is a disparity between the human suffering in the foreground and the apparent ideality of the view in the background. Likewise, in "Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake", the fear and passion of the main actors of the painting are contrasted "with the tranquillity of the noble and majestic landscape that surrounds the scene" (Butterfield 2008: 6).

Lagerlöf (1990: 102-103) draws attention to the fact that four to five different painting levels can be discerned in Poussin's landscape paintings. The foreground is characterised by a very specific and dramatic action (for example, a man being killed by a snake or Phocion's widow gathering his ashes). A footpath, stream or tall trees effect the transition to the next level: the near middleground, on which activities from a daily routine are depicted. The impression is created that the action(s), which are settled on this level, take place over a longer period in relation to the immediacy of the events in the foreground. In the far middleground there is often a further scene in which a community is depicted among imposing buildings. In the background, man-made monuments can often be discerned, before the unprocessed nature takes over in the form of jagged crags and undulating hills. A very interesting comment made by Lagerlöf (1990: 103), is that the different levels in these paintings can be read as though they depicted a progression in time. The movement in the different levels from front to back could, for example, be read as a development from an eternal or static condition in the background, which develops via the unfolding of the centuries in the structures of civilisation in the far middleground to the foreground, where specific actions are depicted. Poussin "carefully provides a series of clues indicating the placement of objects – people, trees, hills, bushes, buildings, and so on – thus making the recession of the space all the more distinct and easy to read" (Butterfield 2008: 4). Not only "Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion" and "Landscape with Man Killed by a Snake", but also the four panels of "The Four Seasons" exhibit these characteristics.

Poussin (1594-1665) painted the four landscapes of "The Four Seasons" for the Duke of Richelieu between 1660 and 1664. It is a landscape cycle in which each landscape represents not only a different season, from "Spring" to "Winter", but also a different hour of the day, and a different stage in human life, from creation to destruction. The tonality in "Summer" and "Autumn" is warm, while it is cool and cold in "Spring" and "Winter" respectively. Each landscape depicts a "narrative scene" (Butterfield 2008: 1) from the Hebrew Bible: "Spring" has the Garden of Eden shortly before

the fall of man as subject; "Summer" depicts Ruth and Boaz in the cornfield; "Autumn" shows the two scouts returning from the Promised Land (Canaan) and "Winter" is dominated by the Deluge. An obvious progression regarding the action and visual detail can be discerned in Poussin's landscape cycle. A striking characteristic is the gradual darkening of the heavens by thunderclouds (almost absent in "Spring" and dominating in "Winter"), which may be symbolic of the approaching apocalypse (the Deluge).

"Spring" depicts the moment Eve offers Adam the fruit of the forbidden tree. Pointedly there is no snake depicted to tempt Eve, only the uniquely human quality of free will. The scale of the painting makes one imagine that Adam and Eve are in an enormous, wild garden, embraced by nature, and quite alone. Far above this scene in the clouds the robed figure of God (directly recalling Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling) is fleeing from the action in the foreground, "removing himself from the scene of the first sin" (McBee 2008: 1).

Spring: Adam and Eve
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin105.html

In "Summer" (see p. 56) the landscape is teeming with figures (including Boaz and the supplicant Ruth) all working towards a successful harvest; cutting down the fully grown wheat, gathering and binding the harvest and providing for the constant needs of the workers. According to McBee (2008: 2) "the dynamic and complex relationship between man and woman and nature could not be more dramatically expressed" than in this landscape.

Summer: Ruth and Boaz
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin106.html

In "Autumn" (see p. 57), the figures can be said to dominate the land: the two spies returning with the Grapes of the Promised land forcefully stride across the foreground while a woman peacefully makes her way toward a stream where a man is fishing. Here the landscape is rocky and wild, in "subtle contrast to the more bucolic and civilized landscape of the fields of Boaz" (McBee 2008: 3).

Autumn: Spies with the Grapes of the Promised Land
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin107.html

"Winter" presents a deeply pessimistic view of the tragedy of human fate. While earlier artists – most notably Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel – have seen the destruction of the entire world in the time of Noah as tragic, nevertheless, the struggles of mankind to survive are depicted as heroic and positive. Each and every effort of the figures in the painting can be seen as hopeless and futile. They are all reaching for something that is clearly unattainable.

Winter: The Flood
http://www.abcgallery.com/P/poussin/poussin64.html

The Role of the Sublime (Ideal) Landscape in *Landskap met vroue en slang*

Initially Lena regards the structural elements of Poussin's sublime landscape cycle "The Four Seasons" as a compositional tool. It offers her techniques to arrange the new landscape in a visually more meaningful way:

> Lena kyk oor haar linkerskouer by die venster uit. Die lug is laag en grou. Die eerste lentereëns het begin val. Op die *voorgrond* is papaja- en mangobome; in die *middel* is die digte blaremassa van die boomtoppe in die klein vallei sigbaar, op die *agtergrond* die huise aan die oorkant daarvan.
>
> (p. 23; my italics)

(Lena looks over her left shoulder through the window. The sky is low and grey. The first spring rains have started to fall. In the foreground are pawpaw and mango trees, in the middle is visible the thick mass of leaves of the treetops in the small valley, in the background, the houses opposite it.)

Poussin's sublime landscapes do not only function as a compositional tool, however, but also as an emotional and interpretational (hermeneutic) tool. As a specific perspective on the natural world, they enable her to handle and control the disorientation and confusion that the surrounding landscape creates in her. She also realises, for example, that it is unnecessary to view the raging, chaotic Natal landscape only as wilderness or wasteland,[6] but that it should rather be regarded as a type of sublime landscape.

Lena asks herself on various occasions why the sublime landscape has such an effect on her and why it fills her with yearning. The most obvious reason is that she is made aware of certain similarities between Poussin's last landscape cycle and her personal experiences in Durban. For example, she sees congruent points between Adam and Eve in the depiction "Spring" on the one hand and herself and Jack on the other:

> Dit is sy en Jack wat soos twee parasiete op die liggaam van die paradyslike tuin voed; verwar en oorweldig deur hulle isolasie, en die oorvloed, en God se voelbare afwesigheid.
>
> (p. 19)

> (It is she and Jack who feed like two parasites on the body of the paradisal garden, confused and overwhelmed by their isolation and the abundance and God's perceptible absence.)

Because of the confusing lushness of the landscape in which she finds herself, Lena feels one with Eve's confusion by the natural abundance surrounding her in the Garden of Eden:

> In "Lente" word die Tuin van Eden uitgebeeld, en hier funksioneer die natuur as 'n mag van verwarring – geestelik sowel as fisies destruktief. Die diminutiewe Eva sit in die natuur soos 'n parasiet op haar gasheer …. Die oorvloed van die natuur verwar Eva.
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> (p. 19)

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6. Traditionally, the wilderness/wasteland was viewed as an absence of development; as an overwhelming and menacing chaos that had to be restricted and kept in check. Especially during the Romanticism, the myth that the wilderness is an ugly, evil and dangerous place was refuted. During this period, the concept of *sublimity* in particular assisted in contributing to a radical new human view of nature. Instead of wild nature being abhorred, it was rather viewed as an expression of God's holy nature: "To signify this new feeling about wild places the concept of sublimity gained widespread usage in the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic category of the sublime dispelled the notion that beauty in nature was seen only in the comfortable, fruitful, and well-ordered. Vast, chaotic scenery could also please" (Nash 1967: 45).

> (In "Spring" the Garden of Eden is depicted and here nature functions as a power of confusion – spiritually as well as physically destructive. The diminutive Eve sits in nature like a parasite on her host …. The abundance of nature confuses Eve.)

Lena can also identify with the elements of ambivalence that emanate from Poussin's later landscape paintings. Regarding "The Four Seasons", Richard Wolheim claims that the ambivalence in nature is taken even further than usual. Lena finds the way in which the landscape in Poussin's late work is depicted as an ambiguous force, particularly intriguing: simultaneously menacing (accentuated by the presence of the snake) and luxuriantly fertile; simultaneously paradisal and sublime; primordial and mysterious; confusing, as well as blindingly beautiful in its abundance. This ambivalence appeals to Lena, as she sees a measure of her own ambivalent feelings reflected in it. Lena also experiences in her relationship with Jack (who, like the snake, simultaneously plays the role of intruder and protector) certain ambivalent feelings:

> Sy is soos twee vroue met twee afsonderlike begeertes: die een stoot hom weg van haar en die ander omhels hom, en die een weet nie van die ander se geheime weersin of drif nie.
>
> (p. 20)

> (She is like two women with two separate desires: one pushes him away from her and the other embraces him, and the one is not aware of the other's secret aversion or passion.)

At first, Lena views her ambivalent emotions as hindrances; as something that prohibits her from freely moving forward as a person and an artist. She is, however, made aware by Mara Darboven of the fact that beauty (and sublimity) is impossible without the recognition of ambivalence:

> Die ervaring van die sublieme gebeur altyd aan of op die grens. Die grens assosieer ek altyd op sy Suid-Afrikaans met 'n doringdraad. Daar is geen skoonheid moontlik sonder 'n gelyktydige gewaarwording van die breuk, van ambivalensie, van die afgrond nie.
>
> (p. 184)

> (The experience of the sublime always happens at or on the border. The border I always associate, in its South African sense, with barbed wire. No beauty is possible without a simultaneous perception of the break, of ambivalence, of the precipice.)

For Lena, the observation of the Durban coastal landscape as a sublime landscape eventually becomes increasingly similar to a meditative practice and mystical experience:

> Die noukeurige kontemplasie van die uitgebeelde landskap word vir Lena toenemend gelyk aan die meditatiewe praktyk. Die oog word volgens bepaalde roetes geleidelik die skildery ingelei, van die voorgrond na die middelgrond, na die diep halfverborge agtergrond – *en vir die duur van die kyk kom daar 'n einde aan chaos en onbehae, die verlange word geharnas en die siel haal vry asem.*
>
> (p. 172; my italics)
>
> (The precise contemplation of the depicted landscape becomes for Lena increasingly akin to the meditative practice. The eye is gradually led by certain routes into the painting, from the foreground to the middleground, to the deep half-concealed background – and for the duration of the looking there is an end to chaos and dissatisfaction, the yearning is harnessed and the soul breathes freely.)

Interestingly enough Poussin meant his late landscapes to be viewed slowly, deliberately and with unbroken concentration (Butterfield 2008: 1). Pierre Rosenburg (2008: 2), former director of the Louvre, remarks in this regard: "He wanted the time one might spend *reading and absorbing a text* in understanding its significance or its message to be spent contemplating his paintings, with the same complete attention, the same concentration, the same emotional engagement". As this leading of the eye via fore-, middle- and background suggests a cognizance of a certain progression in time (see Lägerlof 1990: 103), the sublime landscape also serves as a reminder of the unavoidable passage of time. Because the human figures in these landscapes are depicted as so miniscule and insignificant in contrast to the natural formations that surround them, their transient nature (and the fleeting nature of the human existence in general) are also brought to the attention of the observer. In this regard, the sublime landscape serves as a warning that nothing could ever remain the same (static) and that Lena should, consequently, not become too obsessed with the past. On the other hand, the sublime landscape also gives Lena the opportunity to defend herself against this transience and passage of time. By means of her painting she can, for example, give a measure of permanence to the fleeting moment, find a measure of order and balance in the surrounding chaos and bewilderment; and she can also assimilate her own past into a new artistic context without getting too attached to it.

The Text as Sublime (Ideal) Landscape

In *Landskap met vroue en slang,* a single continuous line of narrative in the traditional sense cannot be identified. The novel should rather be viewed as a collage or montage of different "wordscapes", placed side by side to form an encompassing "landscape cycle". This assumption is supported by the

numerous descriptions of architectural and natural landscapes; the references to paintings, statues and photographs; and chapter titles such as "Die sublieme landskap" (The Sublime Landscape), "In die stad se parke" (In the Parks of the City), "Daardie stralende, trefsekere paar" (That Dazzling, Pertinent Pair), "Teen die kus van Mombassa" (On the Coast of Mombasa), "Mevrou Nosferatu met die passion gap" (Mrs Nosferatu with the Passion Gap), "'n Gesig op die Paradys" (A View of Paradise) and "'n Landskap van asembenemende skoonheid" (A Landscape of Breathtaking Beauty), that are clearly reminiscent of the titles of landscape paintings.

While the sublime landscape painting strives, by means of a certain perspective and visual images, to make visual that which, in many respects, is unimaginable, the text of *Landskap met vroue en slang* strives to a certain extent to capture in word images that fall outside language and words. On the last page of the novel, the following remark is made:

> Die oog word – volgens bepaalde roetes – geleidelik gelei van die geweldadige voorgrond – brutaal, skerp in fokus – na die weelderige en vrugbare (onheilspellende) middelgrond, en van daar na die paradyslike agtergrond – 'n misterieuse, ontwykende, newelagtige gebied soos die vroegste herinnerinnge uit die kindertyd.
>
> (p. 207)
>
> (The eye is – by certain routes – gradually led from the violent foreground – brutal, sharp in focus – to the luxuriant and fertile (menacing) middleground, and from there to the paradisal background – a mysterious, elusive, nebulous terrain, like the earliest childhood memories.)

This description is not only reminiscent of the visual composition of Nicolas Poussin's sublime landscapes, but also focuses the reader's attention on the narrative technique and narrative order of *Landskap met vroue en slang*. On both the structural and contents level, the reader's eye is guided, with delightful effect, back and forth between the fore-, middle- and background of the narrative, in other words, between the central motif regarding Lena Bergh and Jack de Leeuw in the "foreground"; that of Molly and Dyf Bloem, Mara Darboven, Sophie Brand and Keet in the "middleground"; and that of Doctor Kafka and Martjie, Manie and Minna Steyn, the Colonel and the King in the "background".

As the title indicates, the novel strives to reproduce a landscape, admittedly not as a static view of a portion of nature, but a landscape as narrative. According to Pakendorf (1997: 11), Lettie Viljoen strives to develop in her novel the narrative and emblematic possibilities that exist in the art of painting – specifically in the sublime landscapes of the Baroque – and their implications. Louise Viljoen (1998: 88) claims that the novel can be interpreted as an attempt by the author to create a "Landscape with

Women and Snake" in language and even that it may be read as a Poussin painting.

A marked resemblance between Lettie Viljoen's novel and Poussin's "The Four Seasons" can indeed be indicated. In the first instance, the structure of the novel resembles the structure of Poussin's landscape cycle: "Spring" is depicted by Adam and Eve in Paradise, which is reminiscent of Lena and Jack in their subtropical garden. "Summer" portrays the meeting between Ruth and Boaz (Lena gains information about her neighbours, Dyf and Molly Bloem, through the worker couple, Ruta and Bojas). "Autumn" portrays the mission of the scouts to the Promised Land, Canaan, that evoke definite associations with the discovery narratives of the Colonel and Manie Steyn. "Winter" has as inspiration the Deluge, which is clearly echoed in *Landskap met vroue en slang* in the story of the King's murder and the apocalyptic fire that ensues afterwards. On the contents level, obvious similarities between the novel and Poussin's landscape cycle can also be indicated. If there is a story in the novel that can eventually be deconstructed, it covers the events in the life of Lena Bergh during the four seasons of one year, approximately four years after she and her husband, Jack de Leeuw, have relocated from the Western Cape to Natal. The novel spans a period of just a little more than a year, from early October to high summer the next year. This means that the landscape progresses through all four seasons in the course of the novel. The seasons evoke certain associations: for example, Lena's first husband left her in winter, and winter therefore reminds her of negative emotional experiences. The autopsy, however, which represents such a crucial moment in Lena's psychological transcendence, takes place in high summer.

The presentation of *Landskap met vroue en slang* as a (sublime, pictorial) landscape has two important implications, namely: (i) a great degree of stylisation that affirms the status of the text as artwork and focuses the attention on its visual nature, and (ii) an undermining of narrative "flow". The transitions between paragraphs and chapters in the novel (of which some consist of only one sentence) take place like scenes in a film montage or different canvases in a landscape cycle (very similar to Poussin's "The Four Seasons"), with each subsection of equal importance. This montage method undermines the interwoven reality ideal of nineteenth-century (realistic) prose. In some instances this method leads to a total stilling of movement, with the result that the text becomes a series of textual images as the eye catches them:

> Die kind breek per ongeluk 'n glas. Toe sy na Lena oorleun, sien Lena hoe die glas stadig vooroor tuimel – die beweging van die glas so goed as eindeloos vertraag.
>
> (p. 143)

> (The child accidentally breaks a glass. When she leans towards Lena, Lena observes how the glass slowly tumbles forward – the movement of the glass virtually endlessly delayed.)

The result of this is that there is an attempt, on the one hand, to capture and eternalise the so-called *fleeting moment* by means of the narrative and method of presentation, almost like the congealment of paint on canvas. Jansen (1999: 743) says that the author, in the form of [this] novel, [attempts] to hold back time with fragmented narrative themes. On the other hand, there is eventually indeed a realisation of the passage, the irreversibility of time and thus also of transience, as a result of the succession of the various "textual images", as in the "succession" of the different seasons in Poussin's "The Four Seasons".

Conclusion

On the basis of insights she obtains on the sublime (ideal) landscape (specifically the two paintings "Landscape with Man Killed by a Snake" (1648) and "Landscape with Two Nymphs and a Snake" (1659), as well as the landscape cycle, "The Four Seasons" (1660-1664) by Poussin), Lena eventually gets a grip on the surrounding lushness and super-abundance of the coastal landscape of Natal. She comes to the realisation that there is no such thing as an unmitigated view of nature and that *landscape* refers to a very specific (aesthetically processed) perspective on nature as well as the meaning ascribed to it. To view nature with a painter's eye is to experience the picturesque. The pictorial and compositional elements of the *sublime landscape* enable her, among other things, to look at the surrounding landscape and to interpret (read) it more meaningfully. Furthermore, the observation of the landscape according to the conceptual techniques of the *sublime landscape* is for Lena akin to a mystical experience and meditative practice. By reading/interpreting it as a (sublime) pictorial landscape, the novel *Landskap met vroue en slang* is at the same time a confirmation of and a brave resistance against an undeniable transience and brevity of earthly experiences. In view of the insights Lena gains on the basis of her reading on the sublime landscape, she is at last able to capture this ambivalence in her painting and drawing and to transform it into something truly "sublime". *Landskap met vroue en slang* (*Landscape with Women and Snake*) makes it clear that when we adopt a painter's eye in viewing nature, we do not simply experience design or artistic composition but *the effects of nature* on us as perceivers.

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