My Birthright gives me a Servitude on this Land: The Farm Novel within the Discourse on Land

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Summary

From the early nineteenth century to as recently as 1993 narratives that can be characterised as farm novels (a distinct genre in Afrikaans, the "Plaasroman") have been produced consistently in Afrikaans and English canonised prose. The genealogy of this literary form, as well as the meaning of "origin" and "emergence", is discussed. The discursive formation identified is that of land and the ownership of land; and the farm novel is read as a narrative statement together with land laws, events, social and economic changes and political upheavals within this broader discourse. Why does this type of novel keep recurring? Because a "unity", a meaning, has never been constructed? A brief historical look at land and possession resulted in the attempt to describe the canonical "unity" of the farm novel for inscription into the discourse on land and power, and to search for the meaning which the writers sought in a continuity with the past. This mapping for meaning would have to take into account the narrator, focalisation, the didactic, style, the gender of the author, and ultimately also the literary historian's search. Within a wider context than only the literary, the farm novel can be read as part of another discourse which has just begun, that of the dispossessed, constituting once again a search for meaning.

Opsomming

Vanaf die vroeë negentiende eeu tot so onlangs as 1993 word steeds narratiewe binne die Afrikaanse en Engelse gekanoniseerde prosa geproduseer wat as plaasromans gekarakteriseer kan word. Die genealogie van hierdie literêre genre, sowel as die betekenis van "*oorsprong*" en "*ontstaan*", word bespreek. Die diskursiewe formasie geïdentifiseer is dié van grond en grondbesit, en die plaasroman word gelees as 'n narratiewe uiting saam met landwette, gebeurtenisse, sosiale en ekonomiese ontwrigtings en politieke veranderings binne hierdie groter diskoers. Waarom keer hierdie soort narratief gedurig terug? Omdat 'n "eenheid", 'n betekenis, nog nooit gekonstrueer is nie? Vanaf 'n kort historiese oorsig van grond en grondbesit word daar 'n poging aangewend om die "eenheid" van die plaasroman te inskribeer binne die diskoers van land/grond en mag, en van die soektog na betekenis wat die skrywers daarvan in 'n kontinuïteit met die verlede nagestreef het. Hierdie kartering van betekenis moet in ag neem die verteller, fokalisasie, die didaktiese, styl, die geslag van die outeur, en uiteindelik ook die literatuurhistorikus se soektog. Binne 'n breër konteks as slegs die literêre, kan die plaasroman dan gelees word as deel van 'n ander diskoers wat pas begin het, die van die onteiende, wat opnuut 'n soeke na betekenis konstitueer.

Introduction

This particular approach to the topic of the farm novel - or "plaasroman" as this kind of writing in Afrikaans has been typified - is part of a project on the history of a "South African Literature". The question of an epistemology is one of the major concerns.

The emphasis in this approach is not on history in the conventional sense, nor on literature as the canonised text. It will, therefore, not coincide with the literary histories as published to date in South Africa.

I would like to begin with extracts from three different narratives.

The first is my translation from the 1993 plaasroman of Karel Schoeman, *Hierdie lewe* (This Life). The narrator is an aged, dying woman, recalling disjointedly and episodically - merely a voice, like the words of a post-modern character[1] - *that* life on a farm, generations ago in the Karoo.

> During my childhood-years we only owned two farms, the one in the Roggeveld and our winter pasture in the Karoo; but a start had already been made to extend our borders, and I know that there used to be constant enmity with neighbours regarding disputed landownership or markers that had allegedly been moved; and one of the earliest things that I can remember is how Jan Baster was driven from his living space at the end of our land. Also here I never knew the details, but I can remember an elderly brown man standing with his hat in his hand at our door, shaking and stuttering in dismay about the injustice he has come to report to Father. I must have been small, because I remember that I was also upset without knowing why. Father stood wordlessly at the door with Mother just behind him, and I remember how she pummelled him from behind, "tell the Hotnot to go" she hissed. How well can I remember it .... At some time or other it was discovered or decided that the land where Jan Baster stays is part of our farm and he was told to go, while he maintained that all these years it belonged to him and his people and his father lived there before him at the fountain; and then Jakob and Gert (the sons) went over one night, or were sent, and they burnt down the little buildings at the fountain .... Jakob and Gert riding there to Basterfontein to set alight the dry grass of the hartbeeshuisies.
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> How did I know of this? Perhaps someone referred to it at the table or discussed it excitedly in the kitchen. Yes, and one day, long afterwards, old Dulsie (the servant) snarling at Gert "Jan Baster's curse on you, you and Jakob, both of you!", and Gert's face darkening in anger in the dim firelight "Old meid, just say another word ...." His voice dies in my ears, his face disappears in the flickering shadow of the firelight, and I cannot remember anymore. But Jan Baster disappeared. How could he ultimately oppose, and where would he go for help? He and his family trekked across Grootrivier to Griqualand I heard the servants tell later. Can I really remember that tiny procession with the rickety wagon struggling along the road, drifting and bobbing across the undulations of the veld; and that we look at them from the farm, that a voice says to me, "There goes Jan

> Baster?" Afterwards our sheep were often taken to graze at Basterfontein and our shepherds made their own houses there, and no one ever thought about Jan Baster anymore - shaking of injustice at our door in his shabby suit of tanned skins. Who knows today where the fountain received its name excepting me lying here and suddenly remembering him? I never gave an opinion or a judgement, and a word such as unjust I would never think of. There was only an old man clothed in skins, and a fountain where our sheep have been taken all the years to graze.
>
> (Schoeman 1993: 27-28. My translation)

The second is from the Foreword by Bessie Head to Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916).

> It is possible that no other legislation has so deeply affected the lives of black people in South Africa as the Natives' Land Act of 1913. It created overnight a floating landless proletariat whose labour could be used and manipulated at will, and ensured that ownership of the land had finally and securely passed into the hands of the ruling white race.
>
> (Plaatje 1916: ix)

The third is from Nelson Mandela's address at the 90th anniversary of the South African Agricultural Union.

He said that no less than three million people had been unjustly removed from their own land; that a land commission would have to examine deals where land from which blacks had been removed was expropriated; that the new government was committed to a process of land reform (*Cape Times* 19 Oct. 1994).

The common denominator here is land and the ownership of land.

Terminology and Methodology

The farm novel is a literary event that has been recurring since the nineteenth century in Afrikaans and English writing in South Africa. It has consistently been revisited in both language literatures - the most recent examples being in Afrikaans in 1993. In looking at the consistent return of this kind of narrative we should not seek an evolution or a development; but look at the instances when they reappeared and created constructs, as well as when they were absent.

What is the genealogy of the farm novel? Genealogy is not a search for origins.[2] We know the date of the first novel where a farm is the setting: Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883); and if one wants to go further back, there are descriptions of "boor" farmers and their homesteads in *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (1834), by Thomas Pringle; or

we could delve even further into the past, to the diaries of Johanna Duminy of 1797, describing farm life and the community in an outlying district, already written at the beginning of the transition from Dutch to Afrikaans (Franken 1938). We also know that *Die meulenaar* (D.F. Malherbe 1926) is considered as the first real plaasroman in Afrikaans literary history. But those are not the beginnings. To search for a beginning is to imply that there had already been something before, something that had preceded the world of succession. If we listen to literary historians we may be led to think that literary forms just came about, just began to exist - and then we might exclude the role of accident and chance (Foucault 1977: 142). Instead we may have to consider that "what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (Foucault 1977: 142). It is discontinuity. Genealogy will therefore "cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning" (p. 144). It will not go back in time to find a continuity, but rather to indicate that the past lives in the present.

Genealogy is descent - *Herkunft* - a complex route to follow, because one does not seek the similarities, rather the differences, the faults, the dispersions. Speculation about the descent of the farm novel is belied by the accidents and vicissitudes of the descent of characters, or lineage, in the farm novel itself:

> The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.
> (Foucault 1977: 147)

Another concept identified by Nietzsche regarding genealogy is *Entstehung* - emergence (in literary jargon we often hear of "emerging literatures"). Emergence comes about when an eruption of forces takes place within a social formation. An emergence is a place of confrontation in an endlessly repeated - and perpetually revisited - play of dominations. Domination fixes rituals (such as lineage in the farm novel) and rights and obligations (such as, for instance, tenure and land laws); it makes rules which lead to violence, and does not create order (such as appropriation and forced removals).

The concept apocalypse which often prevails in this novel - such as the emergence of the apocalyptic in its sense of the destruction of the old order in South African English and Afrikaans literature - does not imply a necessary ending, the teleological development towards an end. There may have been an underlying wish/desire among the writers of these texts that an apocalypse means the coming about of justice - a will to justice, a will to

retribution (burning cities, burning farms). Nadine Gordimer's use of the famous quotation from Antonio Gramsci as motto for *July's People* (one of the apocalyptic novels) - "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms" (Gordimer 1974 : motto) - may imply that there is historical progression towards justice and eternal truth. Her novel, however, ends in flight. Karel Schoeman's revisitation of the traditional farm novel, *Na die geliefde land* (1972), is set in an interregnum where the new rulers are merely "them", the representatives of the old hegemony can only live in the past, and the young characters exist in an in-between world with nowhere to go. In the farm novels of Etienne Leroux - where the farm has become an estate - the apocalypse is satirised.

One should then view the apocalyptic as the disruption of a pretended unity, a dissociation of identity, and not a synthesis, not a signified.

The repeated return to the farm novel is perhaps not a search for identity, but a commitment to its dissipation: "To accept the farm as home is to accept a living death", says J.M. Coetzee in his essay "Farm novel and Plaasroman" in *White Writing* (1988: 66). No universal truth is found, and the unity of the subject - even the patriarch in the early novels - disappears. Eventually the text ceases to exist, only its traces remain - as in the case of another recent farm novel in Afrikaans: *Die stoetmeester* (1993), by Etienne van Heerden.

A Possible Epistemology

If we conceive of the creation of texts, specifically in our case, literary texts, as a will to knowledge, then the study of that literature is also a will to knowledge. How, then, do we enter into this knowledge? What conceptual tools can we use? I would like to use some of the tools provided by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). Without elaborating, and without dogmatically following him (which is undesirable, if not impossible) I would confine myself to these quotations regarding discursive events and statements:

> Before approaching, with any degree of certainty, a science, or novels, or political speeches, or the *oeuvre* of an author, or even a single book, the material with which one is dealing is, in its raw, neutral state, a population of events in the space of discourse in general. One is led therefore to the project of a *pure description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it.
>
> (Foucault 1972: 27)

And, for an analysis of the discursive field:

> ... we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes.
>
> (Foucault 1972: 28)

We are currently concerned with land and ownership of land, and the statement within that discourse is narrative - where narrative will be read in textualisations of: a law, an event (such as appropriation of land), an exclusion, an oral testimony, the economy, the creation of types, landscape and nature, isolation, racism (particularly in the master-slave relationship). But for our purposes the narrative of the farm novel is of particular interest.

Within the narrative of the farm novel, in Afrikaans and in English (but most particularly in Coetzee's "The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" in *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) certain recurrent elements - styles, scenes, types of character - create an unmistakable similarity of approach, where it is not of importance who the individual authors are, but what the unity of discourse is, and why this unity has been created. Has it created constructs of power which are synonymous with land, property and possession, to counteract the emergence of forces which may ultimately destroy tradition? And why always a return to this kind of novel? Because differences have persisted and disturbed the constructed unity? Because a discursive unity within a linear history has never been attained? But also because the farm novel is one consistent statement within the always differing, always changing ratio between power and land. It can, therefore, not represent a microcosm - or metaphor of the Afrikaner, for instance, as literary historians would like to say - because it is part of the macrocosm of a South African reality. This reality began in 1649 with European agriculture, regressed to the various land appropriations, to the 1913 Land Act creating such protest and resentment that an anti-hegemonic power gained strength from it - the African Native National Congress, today's ANC.[3]

Land and Possession

The *Nieuw-Haerlem*, one of a fleet of three Dutch boats on the way from Batavia to the Patria, is - accidentally - stranded in Table Bay on the 15th of March 1647. "Onderkoopman" Leendert Janszen becomes commander of seamen marginalised at the end of the world. He has to keep them occupied,

to look after the interests of the Dutch East India Company. They remain here for approximately a year before returning with a return fleet. This sojourn in Africa, among the Strandlopers and near the mountain, eventually created the text called the "Remonstrantie",[4] addressed to the Company in Holland.

The text is stylised, rhetorically structured to persuade. It is, ostensibly, the description of a scene, but it changes from description to a narrative of events. The "Remonstrantie" begins as a debate, in the characteristic style: "notwithstanding the fact that ... we nevertheless wish to state ...." An argument is given for the development of the Cape as a garden and farm, with the following supportive facts: the weak situation at St. Helena as a halfway station; the length of the journey to Batavia; the great expense involved when crew take ill in Batavia. Opposed to that there will be fresh products at the Cape so that crew can remain healthy, without expense to the Company: fewer gardeners as well as prisoners from China. Then they give a break down of costs. They emphasise the availability of fish, eland, steenbuck, birds, whales, whale oil, seals.

The following translation comes from *Historic Farms of South Africa* (1931) by Dorothy Fairbridge. It has, therefore, already become part of the discourse on the farm.

> The soil is very good in the valley ... and during the dry season the water can be used for irrigation as required. Everything will grow there as well as in any other part of the world, especially pumpkin, water-melon, cabbage, carrot, radish, turnip, onion, garlic, and all kinds of vegetables .... (I)t is also beyond doubt that all kinds of fruit trees will thrive there, as orange, lime, apple, lemon, citron .... please, therefore, to consider, when all the fruit mentioned can be obtained there in abundance, how many sick will be restored to health by God's goodness; especially when a large number of cattle and sheep have been bartered from the natives for supplies, and which could be procured for a small amount. From the cattle, butter, cheese and milk could also be obtained ....
>
> (Fairbridge 1931: 16)

And all this can be accomplished "... doort maecken van een fort ofte redoute mitsgader een thuin", by erecting a fort and incidentally creating a garden.

In February 1657 Commander van Riebeeck, who would now be in charge of making and maintaining this agricultural enterprise, announced the first freehold grants to free burghers. They were granted a discharge from the Company service to breed cattle, pigs, geese,

> ... in fact anything from which they may derive profit, though the principal intention of the Company is that they shall in the first place practise agriculture

> ... Since the Company attaches great importance to the furthering of agriculture by freemen .... (t)hey shall receive in freehold as much land ... as they may be able to plough ....[5]
>
> (Davenport & Hunt 1974: 2)

The saga of landownership continues through 1732, 1743, and in 1805 there is an instruction on establishing of farm boundaries. In 1820 British Settlers were granted perpetual "quitrent", and in 1880 there came into being the Boer Republican tenure. Under Republican law, certificates of burgher right were issued on application to approved persons "giving the right to select a farm on open ground" (1974: 8).

The taking away of land naturally led to "ressentiment" - another statement in the discourse on land and ownership. Territory was occupied through customary right by the Khoikhoi, and strangers had to have permission to hunt or graze there. The land was used equally by all - it did not belong to the chief and could not be alienated, nor transferred to an individual.

This is an entry in Van Riebeeck's diary about a confrontation, on 10 February 1655:

> Only last night it happened that about 50 of these natives (van dese inwoonders) wanted to put up their huts close to the banks of the moat of our fortress, and when told in a friendly manner by our men to go a little further away, they declared boldly that this was not our land but theirs (wel stoutelijk te kunnen gaven dattet niet ons mare haer eijgen lant was) and that they would place their huts wherever they chose. If we were not disposed to permit them to do so they would attack us with the aid of a large number of people from the interior and kill us.
>
> (Davenport & Hunt 1974: 11)

Here is a report on a land deal between the Company and the Khoikhoi, in 1676, with a Khoi captain, Cuijper, who had made his kraal on the spot where the Governor and his party wanted to mow hay. He was asked to remove his kraals: "This was, as far as we could observe, accepted by him without dissatisfaction, after he had been treated with a little arrack, with which he departed well satisfied" (1974: 11).

The narrative continues: 1819 Cungwa, chief of the Ggunukwebe explains the resentment of Xhosa chiefs at the loss of their land; 1829 General Stockenstrom proposes the settlement of Khoikhoi at the Kat River; 1846 the establishment of Native Reserves in Natal; 1863 the establishment of a "Bushman Reserve"; 1867 the Orange Free State establishes a reserve (Witzieshoek).

But there is no logical historic progression, for in 1883 there is a report of a Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs set up to im-

prove "the condition of the Natives by means of legislative action" (Barry 1883: 52) by enquiring into customs regarding land tenure "... to make such suggestions regarding the Tenure of Land as may seem best suited to carry out, where practicable, the policy of this Colony in the matter of individual Tenure" (1883: 40).

The purpose was, in a sense, to give back what had been taken away.

Then came the 1913 Natives Land Act, the beginning of territorial segregation:

> It aimed specifically to get rid of those features of African land ownership and share-cropping which white farmers found undesirable, and at the same time to increase the size of the African reserves for the more convenient recruiting of labour for the mines.
>
> (Davenport 1978: 259)

The narrative continues. In 1994 the new South African Government begins negotiations to reallocate land.

The above examples represent but a few of the many statements regarding land and ownership. I would now like to consider the one particular literary statement - the narrative - in the farm novel.

The Plaasroman/Farm Novel

Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* was published in 1916, in London. It was the direct result of the Land Act: the text produced at the time of the appeal to the British imperial government, who at that time still had the power to "disallow" legislation passed by the South African parliament.[6] This book, although not only about land, is really a most significant narrative within the discourse, although Plaatje disclaims any literary merit as a "South African native workingman" in his "Prologue":

> Mine is but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation, in which, with all its shortcomings, I have endeavoured to describe the difficulties of the South African natives under a very strange law, so as most readily to be understood by the sympathetic reader.
>
> (Plaatje 1916: 15)

This is also - as far as I know, in English (and I cannot judge in the other nine languages) - the only text concerning land and farming which could specifically be considered part of this discourse *by a writer of the dispossessed*, by one of those being marginalised. And in the continual return to

writing about the land Plaatje's book is the same, but radically different, to the "Remonstrantie" of Janszen and Proot: their appeal was to create farms for colonists, his is not to take land away from the original inhabitants.

Narrative in prose only began in Zulu in 1922, for example. White writing was by then already taking cognisance of industrialisation and urbanisation - although it did not take long for the realisation of the evil of the city, and of the disorientation of the African to become part of black writing, as can be seen in the work of the Dhlomo's. The word "farm" or "plaas" does not exist in Xhosa - only words like "ifama" or "iplasi" - and probably not in the other languages of South Africa either without circumscription. If the word does not exist there is no such concept, and then obviously there would be no discourse about it. It does, however, have affinities with another formation in black writing, the clash between the new and the traditional (Jordan 1940). But to investigate that matter as well would broaden the field too much.

This brings one to the words, of which some meanings would indicate an implicit Western ideology. "Farm" comes from the Medieval Latin "firma", which means "fixed payment", "the confirmation of a document, the signature". The association with property and possession is obvious. The Afrikaans word for possess, "besit", and the word for occupy, "beset", link possession and occupation. And "plaas", from Latin "platea", a place, a large patio, an open space, a space - in which I would like to read: a space, wide area - for oneself. One can play with associations. What about "boer"? There are many meanings: Middledutch, "(ge)bure", Old German, "bur" - dwelling; also "neigbour" (nigh-dweller, which is sometimes inverted within the South African context, (cf. Coetzee 1977) - where there are no neighbours); later, countryman, peasant, rustic, unrefined, opposite to townsman; and "boor" - uncultured, rude coarse, ill-mannered. The Oxford dictionary gives the following historical connotation: "A Dutch colonist in South Africa engaged in agriculture or cattle-breeding"; and, probably since institutionalised apartheid and its maintenance with power, the meaning of Boer has a definite ideological association with police, army and power.

All this began on the farm. Clearly a discourse that we have to take very seriously, especially since historians have created the construct that the beginning of land was the beginning of the Afrikaner.[7] Coetzee in his essay on the farm novels of C.M. van den Heever states:

> Van den Heever is broadly concerned to ... relate certain Romantic commonplaces about the recovery of man's truth in nature to the thesis that the Afrikaner will lose his independence and (eventually) his identity if he loses his base in landownership.
>
> (Coetzee 1988: 110)

The farm novel, furthermore, inscribed the farm labourer and the black character within specific roles into Afrikaans literature and readers' consciousness.[8] Ultimately the most significant construct producing mechanisms will be found in the Afrikaans farm novel, in terms of the "emergence" of this kind of narrative, in terms of ideology and identity, and in terms of black-white relationships.

The question which Coetzee asks in his essay, a reason for the many revisitations to the farm novel, and for Coetzee's as well, is a question I also need to ask, because we do not, it seems, have an answer: what is the meaning of the farm?

Classification

To seek this meaning one would have to attempt a description of the canonical unity of the farm novel for its inscription into a discourse.

Characteristics - not necessarily constants - such as the following can briefly be noted. A closed-off unity is created, a peaceful place, a self-contained world, where threats from outside can be warded off; threats which are related to specific social changes and confrontations (cf. Kannemeyer 1978: 186-187; Mphahlele 1992: 127-131). This unity can be of the nature of a backdrop to other events, such as often in the work of Johannes van Melle, where the farm is the background, the surrounding space, for presentations of poverty, historical events, the struggle of generations, the strength of the individual, the didactical.

The space of the farm is also integrated into the actions, where the farm is the site of the emergence of conflict. There is a certain continuity with the South African - Afrikaans - farm novel and that of the "primordial" European texts of, for instance, Knut Hamsun and Stijn Streuvels where labour with and against nature is constant: the glorification of labour and an emphasis on the power of nature. Within the social and economic conditions since the 20s which perpetuated poverty and alienation, labour was very much accentuated, but because of the disruptions in society it was constructed to contrast sloth and laziness (of the bywoners particularly (Coetzee 1988: 75)). The owner of the means of production was thrifty, those who possessed nothing were lazy and degenerate: possession therefore becoming the road to salvation. The farm, nature, land *meant* the opposite to the city: the idyllic against the ugly; the farm was a constant, an absolute, in the control of the patriarch, from whose lineage the son would inherit the same certainties.

While farm writing has retained certain constants, already found in the

"Remonstrantie": a narrative, nature, crops - and a consciousness of stylisation, a rhetoric which is related to persuasion - differing social structures have influenced the statements within the narrative itself. Naturally literary historians read this as a "development" towards modernism, and later postmodernism, in the farm novel. But if there is any development it should rather be seen as a continual search for meaning - which shifts every time the social structure changes.

Thus, after the damage caused to agriculture by the Great Depression (1929-1932) and the organised self-rehabilitation of the Afrikaner through "Volkskapitalisme" (O'Meara 1983) the nature of the narrative became less farm/land centred. For instance, in the work of Etienne Leroux, from *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins*, in 1962, at the time when "Capital found that apartheid worked" (Saul & Gelb 1981: 24) and there was an economic boom in South Africa, the elements of the narrative became more philosophical, psychological, archetypal. The farm novel was now a peregrination, the initiation of an outsider, a process of individuation; Jungian, allegorical, grotesque. That particular novel, written within the fissure of emerging conflicts, itself a disruption of a continuity, also upset the literary establishment in its prize-giving machinations (Kannemeyer 1983: 355). The reactionary nature of the farm novel had changed to a literary and intellectual radicalism.

Leroux had revisited the farm novel, but wrote beyond its limits, exploiting the unities of the farm, the patriarch, order, types of character, lineage - cf. for instance the half-wit in *Een vir Azazel* (1964). And satirising society - capitalism itself perhaps - and the primordial farm novel, in the search for meaning. But new statements had now disrupted the continuity of the discourse: the dispersion of the subject had begun, lineage had conceived an idiot to be sacrificed; guilt and a mechanical order had been created by wealth and power.

Power

The coloniser created order from the wild, by describing, putting it into words (as the travel writers did); but also by fencing it. In the words of one of the white forefathers "who begat us all", Jacobus Coetzee in the "Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee":

> We cannot count the wild. The wild is one because it is boundless. We can count fig-trees, we can count sheep because the orchard and the farm are bounded. The essence of orchard and farm sheep is number. Our commerce with the wild is a

> tireless enterprise of turning it into orchard and farm. When we cannot fence it and count it we reduce it to number by other means.[9]
>
> (Coetzee 1974: 85)

A fence is a boundary that excludes and includes, those included are owned by the boundaries they have created, and they own the land within the boundaries. Those excluded become the marginalised, the workers.[10] Land is ownership, and in colonial times land was allocated according to the laws of the colonists, disregarding the customs of the original inhabitants. The law with its justification for ownership was synonymous with power. But the right of birth went even beyond the law. J.M. Coetzee talks about owning a farm "supralegally" - as Judge Lucius in Etienne van Heerden's *Toorberg* (1986) has spelt it out since Coetzee wrote his article on C.M. van den Heever (in which he talks of "the value of the farm in transcendent terms"):

> My birthright ... gives me a servitude on this land, even if the deeds ("grondbrief") say it is yours ... Even if it is the devil's. Through birth I have the right here and I shall wander here, ex defectu sanguinis, in the absence of descendants, on my own, even after my death. Hear me.
>
> (Van Heerden 1986: 125)

"The literature of the dying rural order" (Coetzee 1988: 73) is never a dead literature. We have to read the narrative of the farm novel as a statement within the discourse on land and power - as we can only hope the Land Commission of the new government will. It could be very disturbing. The land and the Boer have been one for a long time, and the perception has been created that identity and land are equal.

But there are further correlations: that labour on the land is an inscription of ownership, and not only the labour of the owner. He also owns his labourers. In this reading the 1913 Land Act, which was interpreted by historians as aiming "to increase the size of the African reserves for the more convenient recruiting of labour for the mines"[11] (Davenport 1978: 259) - by instituting landownership by appropriation - also instituted ownership of labour.

In this way land and ownership and the farm novel become statements within an even wider discourse: that of political power, of texts in the construction of a hegemony. But not only the hegemony of Afrikaner Nationalist rule, but also the emergence of that of the African National Congress. The lineage of land created in *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje 1916) an investigation of the Land Act, stories of those who had been dispossessed, from the perspective of a "native workingman", but also of

the expropriators. But land did not only produce this kind of text. Because of it, the wild had to be fenced, animals had to be numbered, order had to be created to make it meaningful. Land is lineage, is patriarchal, is an absolute, is a signified, is meaning.

But if it was created as such in the past, what about a present that is not necessarily a continuum of the past?

Revisitation and Dispersion

It must be of significance that so much of Afrikaans, and some of English farm writing, and not only modern work like that of Karel Schoeman and Etienne van Heerden, is retrospective writing, narratives from the past (Kannemeyer 1983: 17, 22, 25, 41, 302). Kannemeyer in his histories of Afrikaans literature talks of "Herinneringskuns" (1983: 302). In most cases - also in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* - the past is idealised as utopic and idyllic. These remembrances of things past are, of course, normal nostalgia where changes in society are taking place. But a wondrous past was created, where dispossession and expropriation did not exist, where life still had meaning - before the disruptions of Depression, drought and industrialisation. Then the concept of land changed, because it no longer had meaning.

According to Afrikaans literary history "one of the most impressive novels of the 70s" (Kannemeyer 1983: 314) was Anna M. Louw's *Kroniek van Perdepoort* (1975). A patriarch of the past still figures, but what is of especial significance is the texture of the novel, its achronological execution, its allegorical tendencies. It seems to be a conscious disruption of the pattern of the old novel. But the most meaningful is its aspect of revisitation: the reburial of the powerful patriarch, with a concomitant suicide and a visit from the devil. This is a revisiting - revisitation - of the past which is neither memory nor nostalgia. In the second of Leroux's Welgevonden novels - *Een vir Azazel* - the Estate (now a Foundation) and its characters have degenerated in terms of the first novel. This is also a return, not to a pleasant memory, but to find a scapegoat, to attempt an answer to the unanswerable: who has to bear the guilt for the decay? And in later novels - those of Etienne van Heerden (*Toorberg* 1986), and Alexander Strachan (*Die jakkalsjagter* 1990) - the glory of the past lies in ruins. Central characters returning to the farms of the past, to claim their inheritance, their lineage, have become outsiders - in the work of Karel Schoeman (*'n Lug vol helder wolke* 1967; *Na die geliefde land* 1972), and that of a newcomer to the "canon", Eben Venter (*Foxtrot van die vleiseters* 1993), where the main character is clearly narrator as well as recorder. They have found meaning

elsewhere. The return is also, in the case of *Na die geliefde land* (1972), after some political apocalypse: a past which has been fulfilled by the events of the future. But there is no satisfaction yet, because Schoeman's latest novel to date consists of a voice from the past, incessantly talking, remembering death and guilt.

The return of the body, not for reburial, but to claim its - the black person's - stake in the land, in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) has been read as laying the ghost of the traditional South African pastoral.[12] That may refer to white English writing, where the search for meaning has never really directed itself to land and the farm.

Meaning and Dispersion

"The movement of the prototypical *Plaasroman* is steadily towards the revelation of the farm as a source of meaning" (Coetzee 1988: 88). Apart from the nostalgic farm writing, where the blissful idyll is recalled in poetic prose,[13] the plaasroman since the 20s and into the late 40s was written within the awareness of loss: to nature, to economics, to industrialisation. Disruptions forced a search for the meaning of the farm in terms of its dispossession. The succession of farm novels was an attempt at reaffirmation of identity, because identity would have been perceived as having the solidity of meaning, of a signified. Land equalled identity, identity equalled meaning. But the farm, lineage, that culture, slipped into other discourses: capitalism and political power. Now only to be remembered, from what she had seen, but forgotten, from the voices she had heard fragmentarily by a dying spinster, always an outsider, in Schoeman's *Hierdie lewe* (1993).

The search for meaning in the old farm novel could not come to terms with the societal disruptions, primarily because the writers sought meaning in a continuity with the past.

But that other discourse, on land and its expropriation, since colonisation, the 1913 Land Act, the Nationalist Government and the resettlement of people[14] - those voices had never ceased. The revisitation of the plaasroman since the 60s should again be seen as a statement within this formation.

What does revisitation then mean? The literary continuation of a discontinuity that had not been recognised before? The discarding of a search for meaning that was never found in the past? Another search for meaning? A national allegory that has not yet been told? But it may also be that no rupture with the past has been realised, and that a lineage is still being sought, but within a changed literary mode, from the "reflection of reality" in the past, to a "construction of reality" within words merely as signifiers

in the present. The allegory as trope, particularly its ethical and moral attributes should also be read within this search for meaning. In certain instances almost becoming emblematic.[15]

Mapping for meaning within the farm novel would have to take into account the role of the narrator, focalisation, the didactic, the consciousness of style, characters representing an author, who the author is. In modern times only Anna M. Louw and Nadine Gordimer have written farm novels more or less within the known tradition, the others have all been men searching for meaning. Then also the literary historian's search, such as that of J.M. Coetzee, in his articles, but also in novels such as *In the Heart of the Country* (1977).

The consciousness of writing, which was articulated mostly in the poetry of the Dertigers, was manifested in the early plaasromans in the meticulous descriptions of nature - a fact that disturbed literary historians as unnecessary digressions from the narrative (cf. Kannemeyer 1983: 305). But one should read it as an attempt to inscribe nature, to put it into words, to make it part of the meaning of the farm.[16] Later on, in the allegories of Leroux, he introduced a "meturgeman", an interpreter of dreams to explain events.[17] An awareness of writing as it has consciously been exercised in the work of Schoeman and Coetzee does not, however, necessarily guarantee a quest for meaning. In the following passage, from a plaasroman by Schoeman (the return of an outsider to the farm), the main character looks across the farm and hears words being read from the Bible. The words mean nothing:

> Where Kobus is standing on the stoep he can hear his grandmother. Where is the division he wonders, between those words and the wide expanse of the veld in front of him, the mealie-field, the sheep, the far-off hills? No distinction has remained, and her voice carries on like clouds in the sky. Does it mean anything?
> (Schoeman 1967: 6. My translation)

In the "speculative histories" (the words of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) of Coetzee and Schoeman and Etienne van Heerden[18] voices are conversing in silence, without human intercourse, about the past, about a story that has already ended - monologues moving through time. They have created themselves in words that alienate. And the servants, those who have no land, who have always said: "Mies is die mies", "Ja mies", "Dankie, mies" - their voices cannot be remembered - or they stuttered in dismay, like Jan Baster.

The discourse of the dispossessed on land has begun - perhaps they will find meaning, but outside identity and history, because the narrative of the farm novel could not find it there (one could almost adjust Coetzee's

statement quoted earlier to: "To accept the farm as meaning is to accept a living death"). And not as Magda's sigh in *In the Heart of the Country*:

> I need a history and a culture, I need hopes and aspirations, I need a moral sense and a teleology before I will be happy.
>
> (Coetzee 1977: 119)

Notes

1. Her narration is an uncanny reminder of the beginning of Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France in 1970:
   > I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne away beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely te enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me.
   >
   > (Foucault 1972: 215)

2. The concept is discussed philosophically by Michel Foucault in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", from *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (1977: 13); and introduced in characteristic poetic fashion with the following paragraph:
   > Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.
   >
   > (Foucault 1977: 13)

3. "The Natives' Land Act (as it became in June 1913) provoked an unprecedented level of political activity and protest among black South Africans. The South African Native National Congress had been formed in 1912, but the effect of the promulgation of this piece of legislation was to galvanize it into action throughout the country: nothing contributed more to securing its acceptance as a national movement, or to overcoming the geographical and social divisions that had hitherto proved such a stumbling block to the emergence of a united African political movement" (Plaatje 1916: 3-4).

4. The full title of the "Remostrantie" written by Janszen and Proot is given in: E.C. Godée Molsbergen, *De Stichter van Hollands Zuid-Afrika. Jan van Riebeeck*, 1912.

5. The many studies on, for instance, the Kat River settlement are narratives in themselves. Cf. for instance "The legend of Fenner-Solomon" in *Community and Conflict* (Peires 1987).

6. Plaatje was one of a deputation to appeal to the British government in London. He began writing his book on the way to England (Introduction by Brian Willan to *Native Life in South Africa* 1916).

7. Cf. Vernon February (1991). Especially the following quotation, from the historian F.A. van Jaarsveld: "In 1657 Freeburghers were appointed to start cultivation. This was the beginnings of the Afrikaner nation" (1959: 26).

8. "... met die schrijven van deze storie heb ik getracht u het karakter van een Hottenot weer te geven, zoals wij er jaren geleden bij vele onzer oude Boerenfamilies kan aantreffen ...." (Gerwel 1983: 60. Footnote), and the title of one of the chapters in his study, taken from the words of a black character, could be read symbolically: "ek het maar net saam met die baas gekom" (p. 98).

9. I have made use of some of the views of Michael Marais (1994) in an article "Looking Backward to the 'New South Africa' - J.M. Coetzee's exploration of the protocols of travel writing", *Literator* 15(1), pp. 21-32.

10. It is important to note that not only black people became marginalised. The farm narrative also relates of those who were exploited by their own ethnic group (cf. Koos Prinsloo, "Karoonag" 1987).

11. Cf. Also a similar conclusion by Bessie Head in *Native Life in South Africa* (1916: x).

12. Quoted, from an article by A.E. Voss and doubted by J.M. Coetzee (1988: 81).

13. The kind of prose writing, the surface of these texts, should of course be researched as well: from nostalgic and idyllic, to informative, to modern, to postmodern.

14. One recalls the publication *The Discarded People, an Account of African Resettlement in South Africa* (Desmond 1970). As well as the poem by Breytenbach, *Die lewe in die grond*:

    welgeluksalig is die kinders van Dimbaza
    van Welcome Valley, Limehill en Stinkwater
    vrek
    van siektes, ondervoeding, armoede -
    want hulle maak die baas se gesigsveld skoon,
    want hulle ontkom aan die hel,
    want hulle ontruim die gebied van die boer
    - die Boer en sy God -

    (Breytenbach 1972: 22)

15. Cf. Etienne Leroux for the emblematic, and more or less mixed allegories with Anna M. Louw and Etienne van Heerden.

16. Coetzee qualifies regarding the work of Van den Heever: "Van den Heever is doomed to go on acting as their spokesman and interpreter, *telling for* them" (1988: 90); and: "Feeling and being made to feel are, here, ways of reading the landscape" (p. 90).

17. And here, as in the early plaasroman, the backward person, the idiot, the half-wit may even be read as "opposing" the narrator/author - as the one without words and meaning.

18. *In the Heart of the Country* (Coetzee 1977), *Hierdie lewe* (Schoeman 1993) and *Die stoetmeester* (Van Heerden 1993).

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