



Essay

## Coming to Afrikaans

Mark Sanders

My earliest memories of Afrikaans come back to me in the form of names. My mother has taken my sister and me along to visit a friend of hers, also a nursing sister, at a house in Platteklouf, perhaps owned by her boyfriend. It is a hot summer afternoon, and we take a dip in the pool. Lean and tanned, with dark hair, the boyfriend is addressed affectionately by my mother's friend as "Bokkie." Is it his actual name? Or is it a term of endearment for her lover? I think I assumed then that it was his name. This was probably wrong, but, connotations of the primal scene aside, my mistake touched up against a boundary—between the language of love spoken among adults, and the language one is learning as a young child. But also between the English I grew up with, and another language with its own world of relations and emotions. Somehow this boundary never made itself felt *en famille*, when Afrikaans-speaking uncles, aunts, and cousins in Port Elizabeth switched to English when they wanted to make us feel welcome. The names that come back from those family visits are "Fielies" and "Stompie." The names of the family's little dogs, they never raised the sort of questions that "Bokkie" did. They were never ambiguous. Can a dog have a nickname?

It is perhaps surprising that, with our PE relatives, on my mother's side, we felt less of a boundary: this is English, this is Afrikaans, and alludes to another world entirely. For our PE relatives were, in some sense, as Afrikaans as one could get. Gentle Uncle Jannie, who worked as an industrial psychologist for the SAR, was staunch in his nationalism (other members of the family gossiped about his having belonged to the Ossewabrandwag, but, if he had, that was something in the past). Uncle Jannie let me, an avid young philatelist, look at his collection of stamps and envelopes commemorating the centenary Ossewatrek of 1938, and I was allowed to page through his copy of the *Ossewa-gedenkboek*. I was too young to want to read any of the books without pictures, but he also had a shelf of Afrikaans literature of the same era. Perhaps as much because of the books' distinctive illustrations as their unusual one-word author, Mikro is the one name I recall.

Both of my adoptive parents were bilingual in Afrikaans and English. My mother because her own parents were, respectively, Afrikaans and Irish, from the Eastern Cape. My father because he grew up in Rawsonville, the son of Jewish immigrants (or refugees) from Lithuania, whose stepfather owned a shop in this small town near Worcester in the Breede River Valley. His milieu as a boy would have included both white and brown speakers of Afrikaans; I remember him referring to a child minder of his by the name of Piet Mossie. After he came back from the War and dropped out of the University of Cape Town, he found work as a traveler for a general wholesaler in Cape Town. Like other restless young men who had been demobbed, what appealed to him was the independence of being on the road. His Afrikaans came in handy when he visited shopkeepers in the country, just as his country upbringing gave him an easy affinity with them.

I grew up in Sea Point, went to Sea Point Boys' Junior School, and then to Sea Point Boys' High. I grew up speaking English, and took Afrikaans as a second language for Matric. Getting high marks in the subject was easy. But when I went to UCT, it never crossed my mind to take Afrikaans en Nederlands. Having wanted to study philosophy and Xhosa, I ended up taking English when the classes for Xhosa Intensive turned out to be at the same time as the lectures for Philosophy I. This was, as I relate in my book *Learning Zulu: A Secret History of Language in South Africa*, the beginning of the long detour I took before devoting myself to learning an African language. The closest I came to enrolling in Afrikaans en Nederlands at UCT was when, trying to figure out a way of eluding military conscription, which I would have faced after graduating, I spoke with Roy Pfeiffer about emigrating to

Mark Sanders is professor of comparative literature and English at New York University, New York, United States, and Extraordinary Professor of Afrikaans and Dutch at Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa. His most recent book is *Learning Zulu: A Secret History of Language in South Africa*.  
Email: ms130@nyu.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i2.14704>

the Netherlands. In the event, I remained in Cape Town, took Honors in English, and, as the threat of arrest for not obeying the call-up evaporated around 1990, the idea of learning Dutch also fell by the wayside. But other, more personal, reasons made me wish to leave. Awaiting the results of my applications to PhD programs in the United States, I enrolled for an MA in Literary Studies at UCT. I took the module in comparative South African literature. Chris van der Merwe introduced us to early Afrikaans literature, and J. M. Coetzee, André Brink, Dorothy Driver, and Stephen Watson did much to stimulate us toward comparison. Coetzee drew in his sessions on his *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, which was already a touchstone for me—a guide to what was possible when Afrikaans literature was as carefully analyzed as literature in English by a scholar attuned to linguistic nuance. Inflected by linguistics and semiotics, to be sure, Coetzee's intuitions were those of an old-school philologist. The first time I heard the term "comparative philology" was in his classroom remarks. André, Dorothy, and Stephen, all engaged black South African writing.

It is at this juncture that coming to Afrikaans as a student is inseparable from how Afrikaans came to me in my personal life. Shortly before leaving for the United States, having plucked up the courage to trace my birth mother, I would be faced with the real possibility of seeing myself not just as somebody with an Afrikaans side to his family, but as being Afrikaans myself. My birth mother, although she spoke perfect English, was, to cut a long story short by eliding various complications, Afrikaans. Visiting her and her family, who were unbelievably welcoming to me, on one of my trips back, a neighbor came over, and on meeting this stranger whose presence was never explained, asked me: "Is jy 'n Boer?" (Are you a Boer?) Maybe I said something like "Ek weet nie," (I don't know) because he replied, in his good-natured way: "As jy Afrikaans praat, is jy 'n Boer" (If you speak Afrikaans, you're a Boer). This was in the 1990s, when white Afrikaners were searching for a post-apartheid cultural identity, and "Boer" appealed to some people as a name for it. After he was told, "Hy's familie," (He's family) he did not probe further. But I could not help asking myself existential questions. His reply had stated a minimal criterion for belonging, and, despite my not speaking a fluent idiomatic Afrikaans, I seemed to have met it even if I would never have claimed it myself. Was I in fact, therefore, really a Boer?

Asking myself such questions hardly resonated at Columbia University, where I was now a PhD student in comparative literature. Although identity politics, as it evolved under US multiculturalism was then strongly in evidence, the identity with which I was struggling was not one that it was meaningful to assert, even if it was safe to do so, which it was not. Simply being a white South African required, in the American academy, what is today called virtue signaling; the alternative, in the broader community, was for racists to claim one as one of their own. But my self-questioning, including an ineluctable sense of complicity, influenced the work I was to do for my doctorate. Having come across a reference to "lojale verset" (loyal opposition, or loyal resistance) and N. P. van Wyk Louw in a novel by Etienne van Heerden (but I also believe I heard the name "Van Wyk Louw" much earlier: inexplicably, I associate it with "Bokkie"), I began reading Louw's essays from the 1930s. After a friend in South Africa told me about Gerrit Olivier's excellent critical study of Louw, I began to discern, in the term "complicity," an *Ansatzpunkt*, or starting point, in Erich Auerbach's sense, for a dissertation in comparative literature. I had also grown interested in Martin Heidegger, who as rector of the University of Freiburg, in 1933 publicly aligned himself and his institution with National Socialism. I never quite convinced myself that, although the question of complicity is central to both cases, that there was enough of a similarity between Louw's advocacy of apartheid and Heidegger's Nazism.

The stronger links, I realized, were between South African intellectuals who supported or opposed apartheid. When I reworked my dissertation, I added a chapter on Steve Biko, who, in *I Write What I Like*, famously sought to remind the "black man [...] of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth" (28). Frantz Fanon became newly important to me, as did Karl Jaspers, whom Fanon and Biko both read. I read more widely in Afrikaans, adding a full chapter on Breytenbach, but also making reference to figures as various as Keet, Cronjé, and others. My discussion of Heidegger was condensed to a few pages in an introduction, where I laid out a theoretical framework taken up from Derrida. The result was my first book, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. It caught on among literary scholars in South Africa, and, in 2005, I was invited to deliver the annual N. P. van Wyk Louw memorial lecture at the University of Johannesburg. Although a couple of pieces on the fiction of Marlene van Niekerk followed, it was not long until I threw myself into learning Zulu, a project that occupied me for several years.

Approaching Afrikaans literature as a comparativist means that my reading and scholarship have not unfolded in linear fashion. Coming to Afrikaans has thus been a taking leave and a coming back, a grasping and

a letting go—as the dancer takes and releases their partner’s hand. That is the metaphor I borrow from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the eagle and the serpent, Zarathustra’s animal companions, speak back to him his thought of the eternal recurrence of the same (*ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen*). The rhythm of that *Wiederkunft* is, in their words, like the grasping and letting go in the dance: “Oh Zarathustra [...] Solchen, die denken wie wir, tanzen alle Dinge selber: das kommt und reicht sich die Hand and lacht und flieht—und kommt zurück” (272). In R. J. Hollingdale’s translation, this passage is rendered as follows: “O Zarathustra [...] all things themselves dance for such as think as we: they come and offer their hand and laugh and flee—and return” (234).

Just last month, as I was preparing for my inaugural visit as extraordinary professor, an honor that I can hardly begin to acknowledge, by reading some recent Afrikaans fiction recommended to me by Andries Visagie, when I had also begun writing a piece about cycling in the footsteps of Nietzsche, I had occasion to return to N. P. van Wyk Louw’s 1938 essay, “Die ewige trek,” (The eternal trek) which I analyze in detail in *Complicities*. I had just started reading again, after more than thirty years, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which I read in Hollingdale’s English translation in my late teens, and selected as my prize in high school for excellence in English and Afrikaans. This time I was reading *Also sprach Zarathustra* in German, which allowed its words to resonate profoundly with those of Louw. The keyword, of course, is the cognate word “ewig,” or “ewig,” in German. I wish that Johan Degenaar, who generously gave me a few hours of time at his home in Stellenbosch as I began my doctoral work, and whose lectures on Nietzsche I heard in Grahamstown at the festival, were still here to give his view. Louw’s idea of an “ewige trek,” it seemed clear to me now, was a variation on Nietzsche’s “ewige Wiederkunft,” or “ewige Wiederkehr.” The Nietzschean aristocratism of Louw and his circle is well known to scholars (and is evident in other of his essays from the 1930s, like “Die aristokratiese ideal” [The aristocratic ideal] and “Gelykmaak en rangordening” [Making equal and rank-ordering]), but, with only the recollection of a schoolboy’s reading of *Zarathustra* in translation to go on, I had never, until this summer, grasped the profound significance of this particular reinscription.

Originally published in the magazine *Die Brandwag*, Louw’s essay was written on the occasion of the 1938 centenary trek. Compared with the nationalist propaganda one finds in the *Gedenkboek*, by C. M. van den Heever and others, Louw’s essay is a study in critical subtlety—a perfect example of what he termed *lojale verset*. Identifying three successive historical “keerpunte” (turning points)—the decision to trek into the hinterland, the declaration of war against Britain, and the choice of Afrikaans over Dutch—Louw argues for the stripping away of “alles wat enkel tydgebonde aan die historiese instansie is” (everything that is uniquely time-bound to the historical instance) (95). Although he acknowledges that, at least at the first of these “keerpunte,” national consciousness could scarcely have existed, he is still prepared to posit an “ewige trek van die volk,” (eternal trek of the *volk*) and “een volkswording” (98, 102) (one becoming of the *volk*). In short, Louw transgresses the rules of metaphysics by giving the ontological “same”—that which is “ewig” in its recurrent “krisis” (crisis) or “ewig op trek” (eternally trekking) (98, 95)—a name. That name is, of course, *volk*. Although it is through and through historical, *volk* is never subject to the stripping away of the “historical instance,” or “historical instantiation,” never subject to phenomenological *epoche*.

Among Nietzsche’s formulations one can certainly find names for the “same,” such as “Sein” or even “Mensch,” in the chapter I am reading from *Zarathustra*. But Louw’s setting to work is of a different order, bringing to mind the use that Nietzsche’s work was put by the German reactionaries—which laid the foundation for his appropriation by the Nazis. Louw was not a Nazi, even if he equivocates, in “Die ewige trek,” regarding the very recent German annexation of Czechoslovakia. At the heart of this equivocation is *volk*, in an uninterrogated political and cultural-nationalist sense. Although Louw would distance himself from National Socialism, he never relinquished his investment in the *volk*, or loosened the grip that the idea of *volk* had on him. When, as extraordinary professor in South African language, literature, culture, and history at the University of Amsterdam in the 1950s, he advocated apartheid separate development, a multiplicity of *volkere* (nations) was the unquestioned theoretical basis for his influential notion of *voortbestaan in geregtigheid* (continued existence in justice, or survival in justice).

All of this needs to be remembered, but what strikes me rereading both Louw and Nietzsche now is something else: the way in which comparison can bring forth, not only superficial affinities, but more profoundly shared problems and predicaments. What I refer to is the political use of philosophy—or of metaphysics specifically. This is where comparative literature meets deconstruction. A reader of *Zarathustra* could say that the “same” that recurs should, if the rules are being properly followed, never be given a name, even if it is (*Mensch*, for example, or even *Sein*), but it is in the *kehren* and *wiederkehren* (turning and returning), the *kommen* and *wiederkommen* (coming

and coming again) that what we posit as an entity abides (and does not). The entity under erasure, in Derridean terms, in other words.

A reader of Louw could equally say: yes, there are *keerpunte* just as there is a *Wiederkehr*, and that there could thus be a recurrence of a “same.” But that we can even go a step further, and strip away the name that Louw gives it. And we can also, drawing on our philological knowledge (Nietzsche himself was a professor of philology before his health failed), then say that “trek,” like the German “Zug,” with which it is cognate, is also “trace” in the deconstructive sense—the non-origin on the basis of which the origin is constituted, the non-entity on the basis of which the entity is posited. In a passage in “Die ewige trek” that I had overlooked until just the other day, Louw writes beautifully, with uncannily Nietzschean echoes of precipices and ravines, that

*Die volk loop soos 'n slaapwandelaar wat langs gevaarlike kranse en skeure gaan, en op elke draai kan hy afstort en vernietig word. Maar hy weet nie van die gevare nie, en dit is alleen wanneer die spoor agterna gesien word, dat mens gewaar hoe hy tussen die afgronde deurgeveg het.*  
(96)

The volk is like a sleepwalker walking close to dangerous cliffs and ravines, and at every turn he could fall and be destroyed. But he does not know of the dangers, and it is only when one sees his spoor afterwards that one realizes how he had threaded his way amongst the abysses.

Derrida liked to link “trait” in French with “Spur” in German. Here we have the Afrikaans cognate “spoor”, also a loan word in English. I would like to think that this personification can be undone as a metaphor. Just like an animal’s, the existence and action of the sleepwalker are posited on the basis of its “spoor.” But why a sleepwalker, and why indeed a *volk*, when what is material is an action, and not even an entity?

I do not know how these few reflections resonate with you today. And I do not really want to enter a lesson. But you know, perhaps better than I do, that the detachment of Afrikaans from the idea of *volk* in the political sense, is what has opened the possibility for new experiments in Afrikaans literature, from the linguistic hyper-localism and macaronic writing of Ronelda Kamfer, to the cosmopolitanism of an S. J. Naudé or an Eben Venter, with their constant translation between languages and worlds. The writer reaches out, or she reaches inward. Afrikaans traces. The philological imagination can follow, it can join in the dance. And it can leave—no, it must be *free* also to leave. And perhaps it is here that an allusion to early Afrikaans literature that a few of you might recognize might not be out of place. Of the characters of Oom Jan Vasvat and Neef Daantje Loslaat, I know whose hand I would rather take.<sup>1</sup>

#### Acknowledgement

This essay was originally spoken by the author as their inaugural seminar as Extraordinary Professor of Afrikaans and Dutch at Stellenbosch University on 11 August 2022.

#### Note

1. I allude to figures from Jan Lion Cachet’s *Sewe duiwels en wat hulle gedoen het*.

#### Works cited

- Biko, Steve. *I Write What I Like*, edited by Aelred Stubbs. Harper, 1986.  
Lion Cachet, Jan. *Sewe duiwels en wat hulle gedoen het: Sketse uit die Afrikaanse buitelewe*. Het Westen-drukkerij, 1907.  
Louw, N. P. van Wyk. *Versamelde prosa*, vol. 1. Tafelberg, 1986.  
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Also sprach Zarathustra. Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari. Volume 4. Deutschen Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin, 2003.