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## Peter Blum and Italy: 'Italië het ons aangegryp'

### Peter Blum and Italy: 'Italy fascinated us'

Early readers of the two volumes of verse—*Steenbok tot poolsee* ("Capricorn to Polar Sea", 1955) and *Enklaves van die lig* ("Enclaves of the Light", 1958)—of Peter Blum (1925–90) recognised his original and distinctive grasp of Afrikaans, although he was not a native speaker, and acknowledged that his work brought to the language a strong sense of European culture and history. Within that Europeanness, the Italian dimension of Blum's work is explored here. There are some biographical sources for the sensitivity to and knowledge of Italy revealed in the poetry. This paper explores particularly Blum's "Kaapse sonnette" ("Cape Sonnets"), versions of some of the *Sonetti Romaneschi* of G. G. Belli (1791–1863), transposed to Cape Town of the 1950s, and "Die klok in die newel: 'n narrasie in twee episodes" ("The Bell in the Mist: A Narration in Two Episodes"), an autobiographical mini-epic that brings together Blum's adolescence and young manhood in an account of his calling as a poet. Although Blum chose Afrikaans as his poetic medium, and rejected his native German, his embrace of Italy was largely mediated by his reading of Goethe. **Keywords:** Afrikaans poetry, G. G. Belli, Italy, J. W. von Goethe, Kaaps (Afrikaans language variety), Peter Blum, *Sonetti Romaneschi*.

Peter Blum, who was born in Europe and died in England, was a South African—Afrikaans—poet.<sup>1</sup> Where in Europe Blum was born is part of his mystery. Applying for South African citizenship in 1948, the poet identified himself as "Austrian (by birth and parentage), German by annexation" and gave his birthplace as Vienna, but later claimed to have been born in Trieste (quoted in Kannemeyer 147). The German-Italian ambiguity is characteristic. Blum's death certificate records only that he was born in Austria. His family was German-speaking, and the poet may have been schooled in Berlin, or elsewhere in Germany, and in Switzerland. In his youth he knew Split, the town of Diocletian, about whom he wrote in later life, and he had travelled in Croatia. The ambience of his youth was multi-lingual: German, Slavic languages, Italian, and early education in Latin. Later he studied French and made distinguished translations of Baudelaire and Apollinaire into Afrikaans, the poetic medium he settled on, after having first written verse in English, and even having considered German. As a member of what had become a Catholic family with Jewish roots, perhaps Peter Blum can also be thought of as a late citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Blum settled with his parents in South Africa in 1937, when he was twelve. Five years later he matriculated from an English-medium school in Durban (the town of

the young Fernando Pessoa, of Roy Campbell and Douglas Livingstone, in the birth province of D. J. Opperman). He went on to the University of Stellenbosch, and worked as a librarian in Cape Town and the Free State. His two volumes of Afrikaans verse, *Steenbok tot poolsee* ("Capricorn to Polar Sea") and *Enklaves van die lig* ("Enclaves of the Light") were published in 1955 and 1958, not without controversy, but generally to great critical acclaim. Blum twice applied for South African citizenship, in 1948 and 1959. For complex and not generally satisfactory reasons, he was twice refused, and shortly after the second refusal, he left South Africa with his wife Hettie, never to return, and died in London in 1990. J. C. Kannemeyer (6) said that "The departure of Blum from South Africa was more than the mere moving-on of a chance immigrant. It is to this day the greatest single loss suffered by Afrikaans literature."

This paper explores one aspect of Blum's poetry which was recognized early by a number of eminent South African readers, concentrating particularly on his "Kaapse sonnette" ("Cape Sonnets"), Blum's versions of some of G. G. Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi*, and on "Die klok in die newel" ("The Bell in the Mist"), a brief autobiographical epic. M. P. Oosterhof found the poetry thoroughly Afrikaans, but enriched by the strong connection with European culture and history (see Kannemeyer 68). N. P. van Wyk Louw acknowledged Blum's impressive take on the Afrikaans language, but saw that his verse showed nonetheless a range of motives, and an independence of Afrikaans predecessors, rarely seen in his contemporaries. Louw also recognized that Blum carried in him a whole depth of Afrikaans and European culture (Kannemeyer 74). Van Wyk Louw's brother W. E. G. (Gladstone) Louw saw in Blum's verse "a remarkable synthesis of a European spiritual background and the Afrikaans *boer* (farmer) world" (Kannemeyer 111). Rob Antonissen saw in Blum's second volume "an astonishingly coherent display of South Africanness and Europeanness" (Kannemeyer 115). Within that "Europeanness" it is the Italian dimension of Blum's work that is dealt with here.

On a familiar level, Blum uses simple Italian interjections like *troppo* and *basta*. Perhaps thinking of Vivaldi's *L'Amore per Elvira* Blum dedicates a poem to his wife with the inscription "Per la mia adorata Elvira", writing that Italy had seized them both: "Italië het ons aangegryp" ("Italy fascinated us"). He meditates on *Piantar il leone* and invokes Enrico Dandolo, Saint Anthony of Padua and Santa Rita. More profoundly Blum quotes Dante in his anti-imperialist and individualist reading of the le Nain painting "Peasant family with interior":

dís die vreeslikste, dís  
 Inferno se voorsmaak (*per mi si va  
 nella città dolente*) dat hier elkeen  
 apart sy persoonlike harde bene kou  
 (Ugolino die kopbeen!)  
 ("Boeregesin met binnehuis")<sup>2</sup>

The quotation “*per mi si va / nella città dolente*”—“Through me the way leads to the city of woe”—is the first line of the inscription above the door to Hell, through which Dante and Vergil pass at the beginning of Canto III of the *Purgatorio*.<sup>3</sup>

Blum’s visual and historical and sympathetic imagination is stimulated by Italian painting, and beyond the humanism of the Renaissance with which in maturity he seems to identify himself, he invokes Latin poets and the Rome of the Empire. This identification with Italy emerges from the energy of a tension between the Germanic and the Romance. As a young man Blum claimed to prefer Milton to Dante, for the English poet’s “greater and nobler” conception (quoted in Kannemeyer, 16), although at that time he was also reading Leopardi, along with Rochester, the Troubadours, Villon and Chaucer (Kannemeyer 17). But when he was working on his second volume, Blum acknowledged that Dante was now his “ideal [...] beside whom all Germanic phenomena fade” (quoted in Kannemeyer 89). In the course of his pilgrimage to the choice of Afrikaans as his poetic medium, Blum wrote English verse, having first considered and dismissed his native German. He claimed that his command of that language was weak and “As ek in Duits wil skryf moet ek die gevestigde Goethe as my meerdere beskou—en dit kan ek nie” (“If I wanted to write in German, I would have to consider the established Goethe as my better—and that I cannot do.” Kannemeyer 11). Blum must have read Goethe closely: the sage of Weimar became, in a sense, the Afrikaans poet’s guide to Italy.<sup>4</sup>

### **Blum’s ‘Kaapse sonnette’ (‘Cape Sonnets’) and Belli’s *Sonetti Romaneschi***

Blum published nine of these sonnets: six in his first volume and three in his second. “Cape Sonnets” as an English translation of Blum’s title does not convey the full implications of locale and language in “Kaapse sonnette” since the South African poet’s versions both create an “I” figure, a male, speaking Kaaps, the idiomatic Afrikaans of Cape Town, and relocate the voice there as clearly as Belli’s protagonist is at home in Rome and Trastevere.<sup>5</sup> (The speaker is usually anonymous: but seems to be identified in one case.) Some of Blum’s sonnets are faithful versions of originals among the *Sonetti Romaneschi*, but Blum took his admiration for Belli further, and issued a warning to his friend Barend Toerien: “Not ALL the Cape Sonnets are really translated from Belli. Beware of the double ‘leg-pull’! Some (and I don’t want to reveal WHICH) are pure Blum, although in Belli’s style.” (Blum, *Briewe* 321)<sup>6</sup>

Rightly or wrongly Blum argued that Romanescho was not an “arcane” language, and in fact differed very little from standard Italian. (He judged that the language of the Veneto was one of the “difficult dialects”.) Perhaps there is an element of creative pride in Blum’s claim that the language of his sonnets was not completely the “Kaaps-Kleurlings” (Cape Coloured) of the anthropological linguist, “but is ALSO just as much an art product as Burns or Theocritus” (Blum, *Briewe* 321). This suggests something

important about both Belli and Blum: that in their sonnets they are urban pastoralists. Van Wyk Louw saw that Blum, like his inspiration, had achieved something universal in dialect poetry, in a language of the small, the intimate, the humble (Kannemeyer 74). The setting of a recognizable local dialect in the strict form of the sonnet with a surprising feeling of dramatic variety makes Blum an honourable companion to Belli.

Blum's nine "Cape Sonnets" as a whole clearly transpose Belli's setting to the 1950s Cape Town of the Coloured proletariat. Rome and Trastevere become Cape Town, the Papal state becomes apartheid South Africa. The clerical/lay division is not simply translated into white/non-white. Blum's "all-encompassing scepticism" (Olivier 314) and "avowed cosmopolitanism" (Willemse 433) showed little sympathy with either of the major alternatives of South African identity politics: Black African and Afrikaner. The poet had spent seven years working as a librarian with Coloured readers in Cape Town and seems to have developed what might be called an a-political sympathy with what he saw as their cultural vitality and their humorous detachment from the opposing nationalisms of South Africa.

In Cape Sonnet No. 2 "Oor monnemente gepraat" ("Talking of Monuments" in Guy Butler's translation: Grové and Harvey 321), which may recall Belli's no. 1547 "Er masso di piètra" ("The Block of Stone"), the speaker mocks, without naming it, the pretentiousness and solemnity of the Voortrekker Monument. The cornerstone of this Afrikaner shrine near Pretoria, forty metres high, had been laid in 1938 and the monument itself inaugurated in 1949, shortly after the National Party general electoral victory of 1948. Blum's speaker, judging the monolith huge, ugly and over-solemn, asks who paid for it, and offers instead recognizable Cape Town public statues ("elkeen soos 'n mens"—"every one like a person") of figures (both English and Dutch) from the colonial past:

ou Afduim-Murray, Hofmeyr met sy pens;  
 hier's Jan van Riebeeck, bakgat aangetrek  
 in sy *plus-fours*; Cecil Rhodes wat jou wys  
 wa' die reisesbaan lê; en vorie Paalmint-hys  
 ou Mies Victôria met ha' klein spanspek.<sup>7</sup>

These statues are spread through the Mother City, from the south (Rhodes in the Company Gardens, Queen Victoria at Parliament House), through the centre (Murray at the Groote Kerk and Hofmeyr in Church Square) to the reclaimed foreshore (van Riebeeck), on the spot where the first Dutch settlers might have docked.<sup>8</sup> Rhodes's statue is inscribed "Your hinterland is there", and the figure points north into Africa: here he gestures in the same direction towards the Milnerton race course. Victoria's royal orb becomes a musk melon. These recognitions require an intimacy with the locale and a perspective which acknowledges humanity rather than historical significance. Blum would have found both in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*.

Blum's Cape Town setting is also marked by reference to its harbour. No. 3 "Slaaikrappery" (hanky-panky, adultery, literally "scratching in the lettuce") deals with one of Belli's recurring themes: profane love and sex in the context of religion. The speaker denounces a woman he claims has been promiscuously unfaithful to him: she is "Satansgoed" (the "Devil's work"), she will go with any sailor, and she doesn't love Jesus. A number of Belli's sonnets are dramatic monologues or include dialogue, and in "Ou groentesmous" ("Old Vegetable Hawker", no. 4) Blum's speaker, identified in the title of the poem, meditates on the passage of time and the ageing and passing of his friends, as he addresses a customer. Only Table Mountain, it seems, is unchanging: "Hy's 'n goeie ou klippe" ("He's a good old pebble"), No. 8 "Planne in die maanskyn" (Plans in the Moonlight, or Moonshine), perhaps written after the launch of Sputnik on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1957, imagines human settlement on the moon, where white people will live in posh areas with the names of craters (names which the speaker transliterates so as to suggest the new suburbs of the urbanizing Afrikaner middle class). Recalling the separate residential requirements of the Group Areas Act of 1950, the speaker wonders where his people will settle:

En vir ons?

Vir ons die donker gatkant van die maan.<sup>9</sup>

Belli raises the possibility of human occupation of the moon in "Er Zignore e Ccaino" (1147, "The Lord and Cain"), when Cain is banished to "weep in the moon". The bluestocking subject of no. 1294, "La mi' nora" ("My Daughter-in-law"), is quoted as saying "The moon is inhabited".

In Blum's sonnet No. 9 "Die ou beslommernis" ("The Old Vexation") the speaker addresses a judge or magistrate, acknowledging that in South Africa as in Israel (he quotes a number of Biblical cases) "dassie seks wat iewag pla" ("sex is always worrying"):

... ingang tot die Hel—

Ennie ienagste voo'smaak vannie Paradys.<sup>10</sup>

This recalls Blum's image of the mutual isolation of the peasant family in the le Nain painting as "Inferno se voorsmaak" ("Foretaste of Hell").

Four of the "Kaapse sonnette" derive directly from particular originals among the *Sonetti Romaneschi*:

Belli <sup>11</sup>	Blum
430 "La Cucina der Papa"	1. "Die miljenêr se kombuis"
906 "Er Monno muratore"	5. "Opwekkingspreek"
521 "La Morte co la Coda"	6. "Die nasleep"
1515 "Li Padroni de Roma"	7. "Plegtige opening" <sup>12</sup>

Belli's Pope's kitchen becomes a millionaire's kitchen, as big as "porto di mare" ("a seaport"), which Blum renders as "die Duncan-dok" ("the Duncan Dock"), a post-World War II Cape Town building project. The cuisine, which shifts from Roman to Cape, is abundant, but the millionaire, like His Holiness, dines alone. The reference to the carcass of "'n soort bok" (some kind of buck, or perhaps goat) is an urban approximation.

In "Opwekkingspreek" the construction of the Tower of Babel is re-located to Cape Town's post-World War II building boom. This has continuing political implications: in Belli's sonnet the crisis comes when the builders of the tower reach the level of St. Peter's cross: for Blum the mark is the roof of the tower of "die Ou Mutual" (the Old Mutual Building), for many years the city's tallest edifice. At that point "kon skielik niemand Afrikaans verstaan" ("suddenly nobody could understand Afrikaans"), where Belli has "Gnisuno ppiú ccapiva l'itajano" ("no one could understand Italian"). This is a reminder that the Cape Coloureds, whose right to vote had been removed with the passing of the Separate Representation of Voters Act in 1956, are also Afrikaans speakers.

In "Die nasleep" Blum holds on to both the universality of Belli's theme and the particularity of his own historical moment. The *sonetto* opens "Cquà nun ze n'essce" ("We cannot escape this alternative"): Blum has "Dissie tweesprong" (It's the crossroads), which shifts the context slightly towards the historical. (Blum called "tweesprong [...] 'n boekwoord" ["a book word"] Blum, *Briewe*, 321) For "ggjacubbini" ("Jacobins") Blum has "Komminieste" (suggesting the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950), and for "o mminenti o ppaini" ("the people" or the bourgeois) Blum has "Mosleem of Kriste" ("Muslim or Christian"): an allusion to the Muslim faith of the 'Cape Malays'. The temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil are localised, for example, in "spôts" ("sports", games, with a hint of mischief) and "boom" ("marijuana"). Blum seems to allude further to Cape Town's seaside status: he translates "ccredemo a la legge der Ziggnore" ("we believe in the law of the Lord") with a maritime metaphor:

...ons neem wêk in die Jere se boot;

Maar as ons volg en vaar—Mosleem of Kriste—

Dan seil ons teen die groot skrik op—die Dood.<sup>13</sup>

The sea returns in the closing tercet: "drilvis" ("jellyfish"), "innie stookgat offie kebbinklaas" ("in steerage" or in cabin-class), "daai haaibekse Ewagheid" ("that shark-mouthed Eternity").

Blum shifts the general clerical/lay survey of "Li Padroni de Roma" (The Bosses of Rome) to the view of a streetside onlooker at the ceremonial opening of Parliament, an annual Cape Town spectacle. The speaker sees a procession of

... die mense wat die wette  
soos skoenveters lostorring en weer knoop—  
want op watter sole ook al hulle loop,  
die toon is maar bestem vir ons bruin stête.<sup>14</sup>

Blum captures the sound and sequence of the procession into the House all the way up to the Governor-General, the Senate and the Cabinet. (Blum may be alluding to the National Party's packing of the Senate, by act of Parliament in 1956, in order to achieve the two-thirds majority required to change the constitution, so as to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll.) The specifics of the procession highlight and mock the militarist oppression of the apartheid state: soldiers, cadets and the police force are followed by "more uniforms and boots and funny hats". The speaker looks back to the Afrikaners' history of descent from the Dutch and ends, where Belli has "Le donne belle e li mariti loro" ("the beautiful women and their husbands"), with "die nonnies met hul basies" ("the young madams with their masters").

Blum's nine "Kaapse sonnette" and translations are a minuscule proportion of Belli's 2,279 *Sonetti Romaneschi*. Where Belli's are dated, day-by-day, over the thirty years of their composition, Blum's have their own strong sense of historical, social and geographical location. Formally the Afrikaans poet is faithful to the strict demands of sonnet prosody required to match Belli, so that his versions are the equal of Anthony Burgess's less localised translations and of Robert Garioch's Scots versions. Certainly Blum showed a justified artist's pride in his Cape Sonnets: his biographer suggests this was something that made his 25 years in South Africa not a waste of time (Kannemeyer 146).

**'Die klok in die newel: 'n narrasie in twee episodes' (The Bell in the Mist:  
A Narration in Two Episodes)**

This longer autobiographical mini-epic—Blum asked his friend and sympathetic reader Ernst Lindenberg to think of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* but also of Clough's "Les Amours de Voyage" and Goethe's *Römische Elegien* (Blum, *Briewe* 178)—is the final poem in Blum's second and last volume, *Enklaves van die lig*, of 1958. The two episodes of the narration are two southward journeys, the first from Germany into the Italian-speaking cantons of Switzerland, the beginning of the Blum family's emigration from Nazi/Fascist Europe to South Africa in 1937. (The continuation of the journey, into Italy, and from there by sea across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal and along the east coast of Africa to Durban, is not told in the poem.) The second episode of the narration picks up the poet's journey south in early 1943, when he travels as a "binnelander" (inlander) from the Transvaal to the Cape, to begin his studies at the University of Stellenbosch.

Each episode is a love story and together they give an account of Blum's growing conviction of his poetic calling.<sup>15</sup>

Blum's southward pilgrimage in Passus 1 recalls Goethe's *Italian Journey*, and he acknowledged that the whole conception of the "beneficent south" ("die weldadige suide": Blum, *Briewe* 184) was Goethean. On the heights of the Germano-Italian watershed, and expecting wonders, the young northerner is at first disappointed by the "sonnige suide" ("sunny south"). The family stops at Airolo, at the southern mouth of the St Gothard tunnel:

... die dorp waar die sonwaartse val van  
Water begin na die Lombardiese vlakke,  
Die Mare Nostrum (*Kennst du das Land?*), na die bronne,  
Broeiplekke van ons beskawing, was kouer en dieper  
Gesonke in sneeu as ooit die middernagsoekende Ryn se  
Bekken.<sup>16</sup>

Goethe's "Kennst du das Land?" ("Know you the land?") is sung by the young gipsy Mignon to the hero of *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*, who recognises the land as Italy (see Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister* 107–8). At the Madonna del Sasso, the boy sees Bramantino's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. Herod is the first "man of steel with a wooden head" in the poem: like the others he will be brought to justice.<sup>17</sup> In Locarno the young boy recalls Dante when he first sees and falls in love with a young Italian-speaking beauty: "*La m'apparve una donna soletta*" (Purgatorio XXVIII 40).

Suidelik-donker van hare en bruinlik-Romaans van gelaat—  
"Het 'n allenige dame aan my verskyn" in woorde  
Bekend en bemin uit Dante.<sup>18,19</sup>

He is hovering around her house in the rain when she invites him in:

Maar wat sou ons eindelijk saambring?  
Soos by Aeneas en Dido—die weer.<sup>20</sup>

The young lover's reading of the sublime Dante and sad Leopardi is no help with everyday modern conversation, but he reads to his Dido his "eerste lompe gedigte" ("first ungainly poems") at which she giggles, for her own lack of understanding and at "harde Germaanse klanke" ("hard Germanic sounds"). When she invites him to "*qualcosa piu molle*" ("something softer") he is quick to respond "*Volontieri*" ("willingly", with pleasure). Outside, the weather reflects the politics of Europe on the brink of war:

Buite het onweer verdik: die Noorde was somber,  
Triestig die suide, die vloed van geweld oral stygend....<sup>21</sup>

First love for the poet seems to find natural expression in the language of Dante.



Overwhelmed and disturbed by the experience, he returns to his parents. His father comments:

“Wat—geen reisverhaal vanaand? Is die begaper  
Blasé alreeds—en Italië lê nog voor—  
Om nie eers van Afrika te praat nie?”<sup>22</sup>

The next day the boy climbs the heights of Cardada above Locarno. Lost in the mist, he sees the greyness thicken before his eyes, take form and approach him as a person, whom, from his long cloak and old-fashioned cap he recognizes as Dante. The verse form shifts from long-lined sprung rhythm to *terza rima*. For Blum, working in Dante’s measure was a brave enterprise (Blum, *Briewe* 112).

“Dis ek,” sê hy, “dode en Florentyn,  
Nogeens die skeiding tussen twee bestane  
Passerend na my kuns...”<sup>23</sup>

Dante has come to prophesy the overthrow within ten years of the men of steel with heads of wood then ruling Italy and Germany. While he warns the boy against simple optimism he tells him that his master (he who commands me) has decided to favour Blum so that with a small talent he will earn small fame in a small language, for which he must brace himself. Before Dante disappears like Hamlet’s ghost into the dissipating mist, the young boy recognizes the older poet as a friend: as he descends he picks his first berry of the laurel.

Episode two opens (biographically, five years later) with the young man travelling by train to Stellenbosch, where he re-discovers the Mediterranean in the vineyards and Lombardy poplars of the Boland. In the course of his discovery of music, he finds a model as poet and hero in the Germanic myth of Tannhauser, but, in a characteristic Germanic-Romance collocation, the last line of his hero’s dialogue with Eckhardt at the gate of the Venusberg is a direct translation of the last line of the Italian Leopardi’s great poem “L’Infinito” (“Infinity”): “...en skipbreuk lyk my soet in daardie see!” (“...and shipwreck looks sweet to me in that sea!”); in Leopardi’s original “...e il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare.” (“...and in this sea shipwreck is sweet to me”). The first climax of this episode comes ten years later when he returns to university to complete his studies and finds the love of his life. Her Southern complexion and hair recall his young love in Locarno. The intensity and subtlety of Blum’s Italian inspiration emerge in the episode which seals his bond with his wife-to-be. Sewing in gathering dark, she pricks her finger. He raises her finger to his mouth with the Italian phrase learned from the first love of fifteen years before:

“Iets  
Sagter will ek jou wys—*qualcosa piu molle*”  
Fluister ek warm, en sy assenteer “Gewillig”...<sup>24</sup>

Goethe's mediation of both Blum's Italian inspiration and his love story is confirmed by the closing line of Passus 3: "Ewiglik hou sy jou vas". ("She holds you fast for ever.") This is a near translation of the final hemistich of Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, no. XV: "Ewig nün halt sie dich fest".<sup>25</sup>

In the conclusion of "Die klok in die newel" the poet and his wife settle in Cape Town. Overwhelmed and disturbed by the experience, from an autumn landscape whose details recall the Mediterranean and combine a sense of mortality with an awareness of the past as alive in the present, he seeks another mountain to climb (Table Mountain?) and loses his way in the mist:

Op 'n melwe  
herfsdag met blare van poplier geel  
drywend op die rivier ('n Vallombrosa  
van ritselende doodheid) en op walle  
tot humus molmend met 'n reuk wat prik...<sup>26</sup>

Here he meets a mysterious but South African figure, the counterpart to Dante, identified as an older male, whom he calls on as "Fantoom of mens" ("phantom or human") to speak to him. Blum's description of this old man's inarticulate effort to speak contrasts with the eloquence and poise of Dante in Episode I:

Hy  
samel 'n kraakgeluid in waar sy keel  
moes gewees het: soos een wat, lank bewusteloos.  
moesaam 'n spraakorgaan herontdek,  
of soos  
'n ou oop deur in 'n nag se eerste windvlaag  
in sy skarniere kriek...<sup>27</sup>

This apparition is ambiguously addressed as *oom*, a term of respect addressed by any white person to an older white male, or *outa*, for Blum a term used of older non-white men.<sup>28</sup> In answer to the question which Blum put to Ernst Lindenberg—"Wil jy raai wie die verskyning in deel II is?" (Would you like to guess who the apparition is in part II?) (Blum, *Briewe* 184)—it could be said that as Dante represents the European poetic tradition in which the young Blum enrolled himself, "oom of outa" represents the African medium he chose for his calling as a poet, and the persons of those from whom he had learnt.

When the wind opens up the mist and the poet sees his new world of the Cape before him, the experience repeats that of fifteen years before on the heights of Cardada: the bell, the mist, the *campanile* alone and upright as a candle. That the repetitions, of love and poetic vision, are phenomena in nature, is an insight for which he has been prepared by the mysterious old man, although he cannot tell if the apparition was

there or not: “Maar in my was daar lof...” (“But in me there was praise...”). The poem ends with an ode to “Holy tranquility” (“Heilige Trankiliteit”) and as the poet descends the mountain he picks “My first oil-filled fruit of the gnarled olive tree” (“My eerste olievol vrug van die knoestige olyfboom”).

“Die klok in die newel” is an earnest of Blum’s double commitment, to his European heritage and what was for only 25 of his 65 years his South African home: a commitment that was to be revoked when his application for citizenship was a second time refused. The second mature love story validates the first youthful romance: the old man on Table Mountain validates the prophecy of Dante. In a sense for Blum Italian is a language of both love and the poetic calling and the poem suggests that poetic inspiration, like love, is repeatable. “Die klok in die newel” contributes to the general impression that Blum’s work as a whole conforms to a process which can be thought of as the re-Europeanization of post-colonial literature.

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#### Notes

1. For Blum’s biography I rely on Kannemeyer’s *Wat het geword van Peter Blum? Die speurtoeg na die Steppewolf* (1993). All translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own.
2. “this is the most terrible, this is / the foretaste of Inferno (*per mi si va / nella città dolente*) that here each one / chews apart on his personal hard bone / (Ugolino the skull!).”
3. Blum’s quotation modernises Dante slightly: “Per mi si va ne la città dolente ...”
4. Blum found a sympathetic and characteristic epigraph for his poem “Speler op Toer” (“Player on Tour”) in no. V of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*: “Wer aber sind sie, sag mir, die Fahrenden, diese ein wenig / Flüchtigen noch als wir selbst ...? (“But who are they, tell me, these vagrants these a little more / Vagabond than we ourselves ...?”).
5. “Kaaps is ‘n taal, ‘n taal in die sin dat dit die volle lot en noodlot van die mense wat dit praat, dra...” (Kaaps is *a language*, a language in the sense that it carries the whole fate and destiny of the people who speak it ...) (Small “Voorwoord”).
6. Toerien later wrote sympathetically of the “Kaapse sonnette” although he does not seem to have looked at Belli’s originals (see Toerien).
7. “old No-thumb Murray, Hofmeyr with his gut; / here’s Jan van Riebeeck, very smartly dressed // in his plus-fours; Cecil Rhodes who’s pointing / to the race-course; and in front of Parliament / old Mrs. Victoria with her little melon.”
8. In 2012 Murray’s thumb was restored by the sculptor Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe (Schoeman, Van Bart).
9. “And for us? / For us the dark arsehole of the moon.”
10. “... the gateway to Hell / And the only foretaste of Paradise.”
11. Numbering of the Belli sonnets is that of Marcello Teodonio (Belli, *Tutti I Sonetti Romaneschi*).

12. Belli Blum  
 430 "The Pope's Kitchen" 1. "The Millionaire's Kitchen"  
 906 "The Bricklayer World" 5. "Revival Sermon"  
 521 "Death with a Coda" 6. "The Consequence"  
 1515 "The Bosses of Rome" 7. "Ceremonial Opening"
13. "... we take work in the Lord's boat; / but if we follow and persist—Muslim or Christian— / then we sail up against the great fright—Death."
14. "... the people who untie the laws / like shoelaces and tie them up again—/ because whatever soles they walk on, / the toes are intended for our black tails."
15. Quotations from Finus M. P. Oosterhof's *Eikestadnuus* review of *Enklaves van die lig* suggest a just and sensitive account of the poem (Blum, *Brieve* 258n).
16. "... the village where the sunward fall of / Water begins to the Lombardy plains, / The Mare Nostrum (*Kennst du das Land?*), to the springs, / Breeding-grounds of our civilization, was colder and more deeply / Sunk in snow than ever the midnight-seeking Rhine's / Basin."
17. Herod features in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*, particularly in the sequence of three sonnets "Le stragge de li nnoscenti" ("The Slaughter of the Innocents"). The first section of Book 1, chapter 1 of *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Travel* is called "The Flight into Egypt" (473).
18. "Her hair dark of the south and dusky-Romance of complexion—/ 'A woman alone appeared to me' in words / Familiar and beloved from Dante."
19. The fuller context reads: "... e là m'apparve, si com'elli appare / subitamente cosa che disvia / per meraviglia tutto altro pensare, / una donna soletta..." "...and there appeared to me, as a thing / suddenly appears which drives away / in astonishment every other thought, / a woman alone ..." Blum's selective quotation tempers the wonder and highlights the solitariness.
20. "But what would bring us together? / As with Aeneas and Dido—the weather."
21. "Outside the bad weather thickened: the North was sombre, / Gloomy the South, everywhere the flood of violence rising ..."
22. "What, no travel story this evening? Is the tourist / already blasé—and Italy lies ahead—/ to say nothing of Africa?"
23. "'It is I,' he says, 'dead and Florentine, / Still crossing the divide between two ways of being / To my art ...'"
24. "'Something / Softer I want to show you—*qualcosa piu molle*' / I whispered warmly, and she assented 'Willingly'..."
25. The numbering is that of Luke and Veget. Blum acknowledged this inspiration in a letter, but referred to Elegy XIII (Blum, *Brieve* 184). Kannemeyer claimed that there was no direct reference to Roman Elegy no. XIII. This may be because of confusion in the numbering. Of the 24 elegies, Goethe originally withheld nos. 1 and 24, and then nos. 3 and 17, from the remaining 22. So no. XV, in the restored text of Luke and Veget, was originally XIII in the self-censored version (Goethe, *Erotic Poems*; Luke and Veget, "Introduction" and "Notes"). Kannemeyer does not cite any edition of the *Roman Elegies*.
26. "On a soft / autumn day with leaves of poplar yellow / drifting on the river (a Vallombrosa / of rustling mortality) and on banks / rotting to humus with a scent that stings ..."
27. "He / gathers a cracking sound from where his throat / must have been: as one who, long unconscious, / laboriously rediscovers an organ of speech, / or as / an old open door in a night's first gust of wind / creaks in its hinges ..."
28. While ethnically specific, *outa* could acknowledge both age and status, as in being used of the "senior male servant of a household" (*DSAE*, "outa" 2). Blum's phrasing suggests both that he cannot somatically distinguish the apparition, and that this distinction is not important to him. In 21<sup>st</sup> century South Africa *oom* may be losing its ethnic specificity.

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