

Reviews

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Macabre, grim and tragic

Herman Charles Bosman. 2002. *A Cask of jerepigo*. Ed. Stephen Gray. Cape Town. Human and Rousseau. (Anniversary Edition).

Herman Charles Bosman. 2002. *'Unto dust' and other stories*. Ed. Craig Mackenzie. Cape Town. Human and Rousseau. (Anniversary Edition).

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Apart from commercial novels such as those of Wilbur Smith, the stories and miscellaneous writing of Herman Charles Bosman (1905–1951) have become amongst the most popular works in South African English literature. Although they have seldom been out of print once they gained a wide audience in the early 1960s, the new Anniversary Editions of his works under the general editorship of Stephen Gray and Craig MacKenzie, running into nine volumes, are particularly welcome. They are attractively produced, thoroughly edited and are prefaced by useful, scholarly researched introductions which are nevertheless eminently readable. Thus, the reader is provided with important background material concerning Bosman's vision of literature, his sense of South Africa and its political destiny.

The Anniversary Edition of *A cask of jerepigo* is not identical with the first selection of Bosman's miscellaneous journalistic pieces made by Lionel Abrahams and published in 1957, with the subtitle *Sketches and essays by Herman Charles Bosman*. (Of Bosman's short stories only the collection entitled *Mafeking road* appeared in his lifetime.) However, the present edition retains the core of Abrahams's collection (32 out of 47) with an additional 20 pieces. While lighter pieces such as the art reviews have been dropped, important acknowledgements concerning his literary forefathers such as Edgar Allen Poe,

Mark Twain, O Henry, amongst others, have been included. Another important difference is that this volume chronologically sequences the short stories whereas Abrahams arranged the material according to common thematic subjects. Gray argues that while this approach may be unorganized, "a deeper matter may be released: the sense of Bosman's developing personality" (15). Gray adds, "[w]atch out how as he becomes all the more angry with the way his country is going, his touch gets lighter and lighter". Some sense of the change can be gained from a comparison of his writing about the Rand mine dumps in one of his first essays (1931) with his view of the same dumps in 1944. In the earlier piece, "Minedumps", he sententiously compares the longevity of the dumps to the mortality of mankind: "They [the dumps] tell a story of greed and cruelty and oppression – a story that is all the more redolent of the eternal 'tears of things' from being born of the things of tears. Calmly and dispassionately, but with pitiless insistence they tell their story" (27). In the later piece, "Stanhope Minedumps", the tone is lighter, less self-consciously literary: "[it] is strange to reflect on the fact that there are gold mines on the Rand (such as the Old Stanhope, outside Geldenhuys), on which excavations commenced within living memory and which already belong in fact and spirit, with the gold mines of the Aztecs and Inca, and the tin mines of Cornwall" (38). The passage is also more subtle for, even if the mines have run out of their usable life spans, they still stand there; but where are the Aztecs, Inca and Cornish miners? However, because Gray includes only one piece from the period prior to Bosman's ten-year sojourn in Europe, I think he rather exaggerates the evidence for the development of his writing, as portrayed in this edition.

Rather it is the sheer variety of subject-matter and tone in Bosman's writing that is evinced in this edition

of *A cask of jerepigo*. Broadly speaking, four areas of interest can be discerned: art and literature, politics, the city scenes of Cape Town and Johannesburg, and an ironic scrutiny of the prejudices of white South African society, which finds a fuller expression in his short stories. While he speaks highly of the gothicism of Poe, he endorses a romanticism that Shelley would have approved of when he writes in “Study of a poet genius”, “if he lives his life; if in the breadth of his being there is poetry; if his actions are not circumscribed by the outlook of his times but are subject to the cosmic laws of his own creating, which are by divine right at one with the changeless statutes inscribed in the stars ... the artist is a king” (53). Such sentiments may seem surprising in a writer associated with ironic portrayals of backveld Boers, especially if one takes into account that the “poet genius” he is talking about is Baudelaire. However, he does say in “An indigenous South African culture is unfolding” that the literature of South Africa can only succeed if it does not try to emulate the literature of Europe but only if it is rooted in the fundamental conditions of this country, and he particularly admires contemporary Afrikaans writers for having achieved this feat. Perhaps this is the source of his interest in the Marico area.

Bosman’s deep commitment to South Africa is evident in his political pieces. He shows what may be to some readers a problematic admiration for Jan Smuts. However, this is understandable in 1944 when he wrote his article about the man which, in any case, emphasized his literary accomplishments, not the man’s political ideology. Of more importance, in his pieces of 1947, is his underlying foreboding that the electorate of the country was steadily moving towards the political right. This indication of Bosman’s incipient liberalism, however much conditioned by his times, seems to underlie much of his critical attitude towards Afrikaner racism. However, even in the serious area of political debate, his humour cannot be suppressed, as indicated in his outrageously fabricated interview with Jan Hofmeyr. Self-deprecatingly, Bosman admits that “[my] chief difficulty, in trying to get the facts of his career out of Jan Hofmeyr, was that he kept on trying to interview me”

(185). Nevertheless, by an apparently naive discussion of Hofmeyr’s cats (as well as Mary Morison Webster’s nine or eleven), he manages to make the great man thaw out and reveal himself as genial, intellectually brilliant, a cosmopolitan who is nevertheless rooted in South Africa, and a liberal of his time. Despite the numerous absurdities Bosman introduces, he conveys an underlying admiration of and affection for Hofmeyr.

In the anecdotal pieces that imply a criticism of white South African society, Bosman also adopts the Chaucerian voice of a naive narrator who appears to admire the follies and flaws of others. Thus, in “Witpoortjie Falls” he is in awe of Voortrekkers who go seven hundred miles out of their way to take a tortuous route through a rugged gorge when they could have simply taken the direct path over level plains on their trek to the Limpopo. Obviously, Bosman is poking fun at the obduracy and wrong-headedness of contemporary Afrikaners seeking to take the tortuous socio-political route of apartheid. Again, in “The innocents abroad” the narrator’s naive admiration for and jealousy of a young lady with literary pretensions travelling to Great Britain, reveals something of the South African English-speakers’ colonial cringe in the face of the metropolitan centre.

Bosman’s accounts of Cape Town and Johannesburg tend to be more serious as he shows a great affection for these two very different cities. He is intrigued by the history and beauty of the Cape, even if his expectations are not always fulfilled. He celebrates the newness, zest for life and gaudy opulence of Johannesburg. However, even in his meditations on these cities there is humour. For example, his description of a riot in “Johannesburg riots: the lighter side” depicts him, as a reporter on his way to hear a speech by Dr Malan at the City Hall, bemusedly being caught up in a carnivalesque free-for-all.

Unto dust and other stories has also made an appearance as an Anniversary series publication. Bosman wrote 61 of his famous Oom Schalk Lourens

stories. The first twenty of these stories were published by him under the title of *Mafeking road* in 1947 (re-edited and published as *Mafeking road and other stories* in 1998 for the Anniversary Edition). The remainder of these stories have been divided into two groups in the order that they were published. The first 20 were published in the Anniversary series as *Seed-time and harvest and other stories* (2001) and the remaining 21 stories appear in *Unto dust and other stories*, edited by Craig MacKenzie. This last group of stories was written in the productive period of September 1947 to February 1951. Lionel Abrahams gave the volume its title when he put together stories that Bosman had intended to collect but was unable to do so. According to Abrahams, “whim, essentially, dictated the order into which I arranged the stories” although “there needed to be a strong opening story [“Unto dust”] and an aesthetically appropriate final one [“Funeral earth”] (10). Presumably, because of the somewhat arbitrary nature of Abrahams’s original selection, the editor of this version of *Unto dust and other stories* has arranged the works in a different order and included some that were not in the original. Thus, there are two stories that have never before been published (“Bush telegraph” and “Tryst by the Vaal”) and two that have never been taken up by any collection (“Susannah and the play-actor” and “Oom Piet’s party”).

The initial critical reaction to Abrahams’s 1963 *Unto dust* collection was generally favourable and endorsed William Plomer’s very perceptive foreword in which he commented on Bosman’s “playful irony” and “sly, mocking, humorous Afrikaner intelligence” which “punctures pretentiousness and notices the little humbugs and evasion and peculations that go on among ordinary, sober, respectable citizens” (12). Mary Morison Webster, in *The Sunday Times*, noted that his storytelling had “a delightful spontaneity”, however, “the seeming artlessness of his style is nevertheless deceptive. On numerous occasions, he gives an inkling of the subtleties of his technique when, at intervals in a story, he repeats the phrase or string of words which is its motif” (13). Writing from exile in Paris, Lewis Nkosi gives an interesting black perspective when he observes that Bosman’s humour

“depends largely on the demolitions of false grandeur, pride and social pretences of his rural Boers, whose defeat occurs at the end of the story rather like the skilfully engineered fall of the small-town bully” (17). He adds that Bosman “went in search of the ‘true’ Afrikaners. What he found may leave a black reader with a sour taste in his mouth but my God it *was* a find” (18).

Towards the end of his introduction, Mackenzie explores Webster’s claim concerning the artfulness of the short stories. After examining scores of typescript manuscripts housed in the archives of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, he demonstrates how carefully Bosman revised his work. He reproduces some pages of “The Traitor’s Wife”, indicating that Bosman usually typed a rather loose, over-explanatory version of a story which he then drastically pruned. In the case of “The traitor’s wife”, he pruned more than half the original story. However, this first typed draft was itself usually a product of two pencil drafts so that, in all, many stories were often revised about four times. Bosman’s literary sophistication is further evidenced in his ironic textual interplay. Thus, “The Picture of Gysbert Jonker” ironically echoes Oscar Wilde’s *The picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): Gysbert obtains a tobacco advert featuring a man that looks remarkably like him, but unlike the case of aristocratic Dorian Gray, the backveld Boer ages while his picture does not. The comparison produces typical Bosman bathos. Finally, tired of the invidious reminders of his aging, Gysbert throws the picture into his pigsty. The picture now ages until it looks as scruffy as the Boer. Initially art seemed to triumph over life, but finally, Gysbert makes art as ephemeral as life. Another vital aesthetic element, which Mackenzie does not mention, is the self-reflexivity of Bosman’s writing (although this is dealt with in the introductions to the other volumes). Oom Schalk is constantly referring to the art of storytelling, ruminating on the proper subject for a tale, how it should be told, what to include and what to leave out.

Nkosi raises the issue of the “sour taste” produced by some of Bosman’s stories. This hints at a curious

ambivalence in Bosman's work. In stories such as "Unto dust", Oom Schalk and Stoffel Oosthuizen are clearly shown to be wrong-headed in their racism because if the remains of a white man and a black cannot be distinguished from each other in death, there must be some type of equality between the races in life. Bosman is clearly poking fun at the notion of racism, but some readers have felt that the comedy in the short stories downplays the serious implications of Oom Schalk's bigotry and that he is let off rather lightly. However, no such detractions could possibly be applied to stories such as "The missionary" in which the Dutch Reformed missionary is shown to be an arrogant, narrow-minded fool. His bigotry blinds him to any reliable perception of the world. Oom Schalk appears in a better light in this story for he has a direct affinity with the witchdoctor and seems to have sided more with the black man than the white missionary.

It was a delight to be able to revisit two Bosman collections. What struck me in *Unto dust* was that, while Bosman has a reputation for humour, the ironies derived from the twists at the end of his tales are surprisingly often macabre, grim and even tragic. Thanks are due to the editors of these books for giving me the opportunity of gaining this insight.

A heterogeneous display

Deep hStories: Gender and Colonialism in Southern Africa. 2002. Ed. Wendy Woodward, Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi.

PAMELA RYAN

There are always problems in compiling and editing a selection of essays or articles, not the least of which is time. The articles in this book were originally offered as papers at the Gender and Colonialism conference at the University of the Western Cape in 1997. Instead of producing a collection of conference papers or a special issue of a journal, the organisers decided to

produce a book, which appears six years later. Why, I am tempted to ask? Why a book? Perhaps the prior question should be, what is the purpose of a conference? Is it, to use AS Byatt's shrewd description (2002:326), "the windings and manoeuvres of small territorial jealousies and large ambitions"? Or, more kindly, but with myopic Pollyannaism, an "angelic group of humans dedicated to thought, to thinking things through ..."? Perhaps the reasons for attending conferences can be located somewhere between the most idealistic, to share knowledge about issues of significance, to the most pragmatic, to use university funds to get a free ticket to somewhere pleasant. A book certainly has more permanence – there it is, with its pleasing cover, a reliable reference point for further study, but, as things now stand in the South African academy, bringing in less money in terms of research funding than a collection of articles. Whatever the reasons, and to return to my original sentence, there are problems in the time delay between the conference and the arrival of the book, most pertinently, the issue of relevance. Not all the contributors to this book chose to update their material or their references, most of which stop at 1996 (there is one notable exception), but the most glaring omission is the total absence of any mention of Aids in this collection of articles, certainly the most discussed, the most talked about issue today.

These problems aside, *Deep hStories* is a useful, interesting and theoretically astute volume of essays. The editors clearly had a hard task in shaping the book, ensuring that the material is up to date, proofreading (not always consistent) and finding a focus for the writing. They have done a good job, having the sense to sharpen the focus considerably from the broadest of topics, Gender and Colonialism, to the more refined *Deep hStories*, adjusting the gaze of the reader from sociology, feminism and politics to an architecturally defined sense of history. Intriguingly, too, the Introduction narrows the view further as it frames the collection in terms of voice and silence, not the usual and overdetermined dichotomy, voice is power/silence is not, voice is colonizer/silence is colonized, voice is good/silence is bad – no, a much