South African Literature and History, a Crossroads: Herman Charles Bosman's Anglo-Boer War Short Stories

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South African Literature & History, a Crossroads: Herman Charles Bosman's Anglo-Boer War Short Stories

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Whenever it comes to dealing with a literary text from a cultural historian perspective, the question of the relevance of that text to the study of the society in which this literary work was produced arises. Herman Charles Bosman, points out the fact that the supposed competition between the "story teller" and the historian, will inevitably end up in the defeat of the latter. For him, it is more a matter of knowing whose work will be remembered rather than of establishing who upholds the truth (especially since he considers the poet a liar), a point he makes when speaking of ghosts:

> Literature of course - fiction - is packed full of ghosts. But fiction is different from history. At least, I suppose that is what an historian would maintain, ignoring, for the moment, the immortality that is in good fiction. Because, when all is said and done, it is not the dull fact, recorded in terms of historical truth that is going to survive. If you wait long enough you will see in the end that historical fact, carefully checked up and audited by the historian, cedes the place to the poet's embroidered lie.[1]

There is undoubtedly truth in what he writes. Yet, he mockingly goes further by prophesyzing the discovery of the non existence of history:

> It may quite conceivably be proved in the near future that there is no such thing as history; that it is an illusion; a fantastic by-product of man's search for the divine. But how much poorer we would be without this colourful procession. A motley crowd on the banks of the Tiber. New-painted argosies. A Phoenician haggling on an English beach. Tyre in flames. The twilight on Helen's face.
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> Ah, long ago...[2]

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1 Bosman, Herman Charles, *A Cask of Jerepigo,* Johannesburg, Dassie Books, Central News Agency, Ltd, South Africa, 1964, p.49.

2 *Ibid.*p.109.

However provocative this may seem, it can basicaly be read as a dose of Bosman's famed caustic irony which won him the heart of many a reader. His apparent opposition between "story" and "history", may, however, be viewed in the broader perspective of the South African literary context. If looking at the Afrikaner writers of the 20th century, one can not fail to see that the dichotomy mentioned above is omnipresent in the works of authors such as Etienne Leroux, Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer, Etienne van Heerden or J. M. Coetzee. In his own way Herman Charles Bosman is one of the flock. Even if he seems to deny it, the author of *Mafeking Road*, through his writings, proves to be one of the greatest South African historians. He certainly rejects any possibility of providing interesting information through the anecdotes told to him by Boer "old timers" in the Marico district (Transvaal) when he was a young teacher: "It was all information that was, from a scientific point of view, strictly useless"[3]. If we look at it from a "facts and figures" historian's point of view, indeed, we find little to work on. But if we examine it from a different angle, that of a historian of popular culture and mentalities, then many things come to light. We do not find, for example a single date in his war narratives. The reader is referred to no history book to check on dates and reach a better understanding of the context in which the stories take place quite simply beacuse the author, although, a teacher has no such didactic purpose. On the contrary he invites the reader to join the audience of Oom Schalk Lourens, his first person narrator and story teller, recalling the figure of the grand father telling well known stories of his past exploits to his grand children. Although universal, the stories are embedded in a culture which uses the past as the background to explore human psychology and attitudes. As Bosman seems to say "this is how some people react in times of war". The "dryness" of history disappears to be replaced by a more subtle, poetical and full-of-flavour approach to past events. Hence, Bosman's readers who are not well acquainted with the Anglo-Boer war will understand and appreciate the story, but will probably overlook certain details because of the presence of Afrikaans words such as, "veldkornet", "voorkamer", "seksie", "naagmaal", "opsaal", etc., or of passages like: "'Vas staan, Burghers, vas staan,' came the commands of our officers"[4], which are not translated.

This reminder that the stories are supposedly written for an Afrikaner readership comes together with the obligation to have a certain basic knowledge of South African history, seen as a common cultural heritage of Afrikaner families, especially since the stories were written only a few years

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3 *Ibid.* p.116.

4 Herman Charles Bosman, "Mafeking Road" , in *Mafeking Road*, Human & Rousseau Cape Town Johannesburg, 1991, p.45.

after the events that are depicted[5]. In *The Red Coat,* the reader understands that the confrontation between Boer and "English" deals with the First Anglo-Boer War (1881), only because of this eponymous item: the red "coat" worn by British troops, where the same troops wore khaki uniforms in the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The story told by the narrator Oom (uncle) Schalk Lourens in *Yellow Moepels*[6] about his father who, as a young man, went to see a witch doctor with his friend Paul, and learned that his friend was to go far away beyond the sea one day and never come back to the Transvaal, is of the same type. The irony of this story is that the witch doctor in not trusted by the two Boers, yet later the reader learns that the friend is in fact Paul Kruger, and therefore immediately understands that the witch doctor has real gift of foresight. This historical figure, four times president of the Transvaal was indeed forced to flee South Africa when Pretoria was taken by the British troops during the second Anglo-Boer War, he then went to France and died in exile in Switzerland. If these details are not known to the reader, the story fails to make sense. The reader is therefore invited to join the narrator in his world without more ado, and must agree to be guided in the story as if he were well acquainted with its background.

The success of Bosman's short stories lies however in his capacity to focus on human feelings rather than on the context, which is why people from other cultures are not estranged by the seemingly local character of the surroundings. It can be argued that Bosman has more appeal for an American readership than for any other besides White South Africans. The similitude of certain aspects of both countries' histories is noticeable; for example the figure of the Old timer puffing at his pipe, telling stories of settlers setting out in the wilderness against all odds with ox and wagons. The war against native tribes (Zulus, Xhosas etc.) finds an equivalent in the conflict with Sioux and Apaches, the Anglo-Boer War has its counterpart in the American Civil War etc. Yet Bosman's books have been translated into many languages, and a cursory internet search reveals over 127 000 entries for his name, including pages in the Mandarin dialect, which goes to prove the interest he triggers and therefore the universality of his appeal.

Understanding the hidden powers that promote historical events is what the historian seeks to achieve, since what actually happens is the working out of underground forces that have probably been active for a considerable period of time. This is even more the case when it comes to scrutinizing the motivations which led people to act in ways that their own moral and religious values reprove. The collusion between fiction and

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5 Many of his short stories were published in the 1940's when many Afrikaners who had witnessed the anglo-Boer war (1899-1902) were still alive.

6 Herman Charles Bosman, "Yellow Moepels" in *Mafeking Road*, op. cit. p.63.

history is well illutrated by Jonathan Littell's recently published best seller *Les Bienveillantes*[7], in which the horrors of the Second World War are seen through the eyes of an SS officer. This is not to suggest that Bosman had in mind a thorough analysis of the attitude of his countrymen, nor that he sought to denounce anything in his war stories. Yet his understanding of the mental processes of the Boers and his success within the Afrikaner community confers to his stories more substance than mere entertainment.

Framework

The pattern of the story is a key element to Bosman's success as the tragic irony is only unveiled with the story's closing words. *The Question* is a good example of Bosman's technique. The story starts with no immediate reference to the context: "Stephanus Malherbe had difficulty in getting access to the president, to put him the question of which we were all anxious to learn the answer".[8] Then details are gradually disclosed throughout the story: Stephanus Malherbe, the narrator's veldkornet (officer), tries to see the president of the Boer Republic of the Transvaal, Paul Kruger, to ask the mysterious question, but to no avail. The reader knows the story takes place at a time nearing the end of the first period of the war and that the president has to flee to Europe. The veldkornet succeeds in meeting the president at the end of the story, but does not say anything to his men when he comes out. Shortly after that he is killed in battle: "so he never told us what the president had said in answer to his question about the Kruger Millions".[9] Bosman thus pokes fun at people who fantasize about the so called Kruger Millions, the state treasure which mysteriously disappeared when Paul Kruger went into exile to Europe. The teaser is that we do not know what the question is about, and when we do know, we also understand it is too late. The historical mystery remains. If we examine "The Affair at Ysterspruit", for a more thorough analysis of Bosman's narrative framework, we find, at the beginning of the story, the vital minimum information we need to understand the setting of the story:

> It was in the Second Boer War, at the skirmish of Ysterspruit near Kleksdorp, in February, 1902, that Johannes Engelbrecht, eldest son of Ouma Engelbrecht, widow, received a considerable number of bullet-wounds, from which he subsequently died. And when she spoke about the death of her son in battle, Ouma Engelbrecht dwelt heavily on the fact that Johannes had fought bravely. She would enumerate his wounds, and, if you were interested, she would trace in detail

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7 Jonathan Littell, *Les Bienveillantes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.

8 Herman Charles Bosman, *Makapan's Caves and Other Stories*, London, Stephen Gray (ed), Penguin Books, 1987, p.60.

9 *Ibid.* p.65.

> the direction that each bullet took through the body of her son.[10]

This introduction is simple and efficient; no time is spent in long descriptions. The general setting is "the Second Boer War", but the rest is details which are pin-pointed and upon which the narrator wishes to focus: the story deals with a "skirmish", not a great battle involving many people, (even if this battle was a real one), in a spot called Ysterspuit near Kleksdorp. The date is fairly precise and shows the event took place a few months before the end of the war (May 1902)[11]. Only two characters are mentioned and no other protagonist, except for the person listening to the story (the reader) "you", who has to imagine herself sitting and listening to Ouma Engelbrecht's story (it is a story within the story). The enemies who killed Johannes are not mentioned either, but considering the first element given by the narrator stating that the story took place during the war, one assumes that Johannes, being an Afrikaner, has been killed by British soldiers. The two following paragraphs explain that Ouma[12] Englebrechet would invite people to look at a photograph of her son. There seems to be a problem with the picture as the story goes on: "'People put the photograph away from them,' she would say, 'and they would turn it face downwards on the ruskbank. And all the time I say to them, no, Johannes died bravely. I say to them that they don't know how a mother feels.[13]" The mysterious but saddening message given by Ouma is enhanced by the use of direct speech. She addresses the reader directly as if to convince us. This implies we are like the people who visit her and seem to have problems with the photograph. The use by Ouma of the negation "no" as if to answer a remark unknown to us, and her insistent repetition of: "Johannes died bravely", leads the reader to suspect that he may have died a coward. The reflexions the reader may have on the subject are interrupted by the narrator who then goes into a digression, using a first person narrative, as if his thoughts were drifting away:

> When the talk came round to the old days, leading up to and including the Second Boer War, I was always interested when they had a photograph that I could examine, at some farmhouse in that part of the Groot Marico District that faces towards the Kalahari. And when they showed me, hanging framed against a wall of the voorkamer–or having brought it from an adjoining room–a photograph of a burgher of the

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10 Herman Charles Bosman, "The Affair at Ysterspruit" in Lionel Abrahams (ed), *Unto Dust*, Cape Town Johannesburg, Human & Rousseau, 1991, p.109.

11 There was a real battle at Yzerspruit (different spelling) on 24 February 1902, the Boer defeated 700 British soldiers in a convoy and captured 150 wagons with food and ammunitions.

12 Ouma (aunty) and Oom (uncle) are affectionate nicknames in Afrikaans for elder people.

13 *Ibid.*

> South African Republic, father or son or husband or lover, then it was always with a thrill of pride in my land and my people that I looked on a likeness of a hero of the Boer War.[14]

This cultural explanation is undoubtedly meant to lead the reader to understand there is something wrong with the visitor's rejection of Johannes's photograph, maybe even for Afrikaners who might have forgotten what happened then. The narrator goes on to explain how he would react to other photographs being shown to him, specially if he saw a proud Boer officer (veldkornet) pausing stifly on his horse: "And he would have looked less important, although perhaps more solemn, on a night when the empty bully-beef tins rattled against the barbed-wire in front of a blockhouse, and the English Lee-Metfords [rifles] spate fame".[15] Debunking the hero-like attitude of the man in the photograph was not meant to scorn him or to mock his fighting abilities, nor to make fun of his sacrifice; it is more to show the lighter side of things even if the fire power of British guns could indeed mean death to the members of the Boer commando fired at. Death is part of life Bosman seems to say, but some deaths are more terrible than others as the end of this particular story shows. The story of the veldkornet brings the first person narrator, following the bend of his thoughts, to other "lighter sides" of life. When he was a school teacher in the Marico district (as Bosman was at one time), he used to visit his pupils' parents and grand parents, and would interview them to gather story material. The passage is meant as a comic relief from the anguish produced by Ouma Engelbrecht's neurotic insistence on her son's bravery:

> "what happened after that, Oom?" I would say, calling on a parent for about the third week in succession, "when you were trekking through the kloof that night, I mean, and you had muzzled both the black calf with the dappled belly and your daughter, so that Mojaja's kafirs would not be able to hear anything?"
>
> And then the Oom would knock out the ash from his pipe onto his veldskoen and he would proceed to relate- his words a slow and steady rumble and with the red dust of the road in their sound, almost–a tale of terror or of high romance or of soft laughter.[16]

The comic of situation of a schoolteacher's eagerness to know the rest of a story told during a previous visit, a story which stages a man muzzling his calf, but also his daughter, whom we are meant to understand is a very talkative person, contrasts with the drama taking place in Ouma Engelbrecht's parlour. Life is at the centre of the stories told in such a

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14 *Ibid.* p.110.

15 *Ibid.* p.110.

16 Herman Charles Bosman, "The Affair at Ysterspruit" op.cit. p.110.

contest, common everyday life as people would find it everyday: terrible stories "terror", love stories "high romance" or funny stories "soft laughter". These stories told by his pupils' parents in the Marico district are reported by the "poet" in his own short stories, thus allowing them to remain in the Afrikaner public memory. This embedded narrative is a hint of the close link between history and literature that is conventional in Bosman's work: preserving oral traditions is what the historian must do in order to keep track of past events and memories. This is particularly vivid in an African background, when Bosman (from the 1930s' onward) felt that "times were changing" and that "ancestral voices" as Etienne van Heerden[17] put it quoting Coleridge in "The Ballad of Kubla Khan", were disappearing[18]. The following paragraph is part of the digression that the narrator has imposed on the reader, who still does not know what the problem with Johannes Engelbrecht is. He is however drifting to the point since he explains how he came to meet Ouma Engelbrecht. Here, the reader expects to be given more detail as the narrator comes back to his main story. Yet, disappointment awaits him for he is thwarted with another digression describing the teacher-narrator visits Stoffel Brink. The narrator is supposed to be learning about the depth of the Boer trenches at the battle of Magersfontein (hinting ironically again at the "importance" of trifling details), but instead, he gets into a heated debate with Stoffel Brink about the merits of the new didactic school teaching compared to the old fashioned ways. This type of digression is an opportunity for Bosman to express ideas such as the clashes between modernity and the past, giving credit to his story telling as a preserver of the past. The narrator then meets Stoffel Brink's mother-in-law, Ouma Engelbrecht, and at long last the reader has the feeling that he is going to get to the bottom of things. They chat about Stoffel and ordinary life, until the main subject is once again brought to the fore: "Then, of course, she spoke about her son, Johannes, who didn't have to hide in a Magersfontein trench, but was sitting straight up on his horse when all those bullets went through him at Ysterspruit, and who died of his wounds some time later. Johannes had always been such a well-behaved boy, Ouma Engelbrecht told me, and he was gentle and kind-hearted."[19] Then she gives accounts of his childhood, how good a boy he had been. She can voice her sorrow again and speak about how people do not see Johannes with a favourable eye: "'They

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17 Etienne van Heerden, *Ancestral Voices*, New York, Viking Penguin, 1992.

18 Talking about the Old Magistrates' court in Johannesburg, which, when he last visited was abandoned and he feared was soon to be demolished, he wrote: "And remember, as you walk the yard and your footsteps echo because of the silence, that there are ghosts from the past that walk beside you. And for a few moments may the place come alive for you also." Herman Charles Bosman, *My Life and Opinion*, Stephen Gray (ed), Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Human & Rousseau, 2003, pp.136-137.

19 *Ibid.* p.112.

say things about him, and I hardly ever talk of him any more'"[20] and she complains in what seems a plaintive voice that the visitors always place the portrait of her son face downwards beside them. The reader is still without the key that would enable him to decipher the by now uncanny story. The narrator is also in the same position (being an outsider, a teacher coming from elsewhere, a "stranger" according to Ouma Engelbrecht's very words[21]), as he explains to Ouma that people have peculiar attitudes, that he does not want to meddle into local intrigues nor listen to gossips. He asks to see the photograph and they speak about the battle at Ysterspruit, we learn that the Boers, under general Kemp and De la Rey ambushed a British convoy. The narrator finds Ouma a knowledgeable person on war matters, as if she had been a man who had actually fought the battle. He is pleased as he gets another Boer War story which had been denied him by Stoffel Brink who had spoken of education instead. We even have his inner thoughts (another teasing digression), how much he admires men who fought on the Boer side even when history books criticize them. Finally the narrator stops this mental drift to come back to essentials: "Anyway, it was well on towards evening when Ouma Engelbrecht, yielding at last to my cajoleries and entreaties, got up slowly from her chair and went into the adjoining room. She returned with a photograph enclosed in a heavy black frame".[22] The author raises the reader's expectations of an answer by repeating there is an unknown problem, since the narrator himself is in the same position: "I waited, tense with curiosity, to see the portrait of that son of hers who had died of wounds at Ysterspruit, and whose reputation the loose prattle of the neighbourhood had invested with a dishonour as dark as the frame about his photograph".[23] This teasing technique of the author reaches its climax with the wry conclusion of the story where the narrator reacts like the neighbours he had just been criticising:

> And she was still talking about the things that went on in a mother's heart, things of pride and sorrow that the world did not understand, when in an unconscious reaction, hardly aware of what I was doing, I placed beside me on the rusbank, face downwards, the photograph of a young man whose hat brim was cocked on the right side, jauntily, and whose jacket with narrow lapels was buttoned up high. With a queer jumble of inarticulate feelings I realized that, in the affair at Ysterspruit, they were all Mauser bullets that had passed through the youthful body of Johannes Engelbrecht, National Scout.[24]

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20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*p.113.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.* p.114.

This conclusion is characteristic of Bosman's technique of unexpected endings. The whole story, as I have tried to show, is actively organised around this focal point. Here the loop is looped: the situation is the same in the life of Ouma Engelbrecht who still laments for the same reasons expressed at the beginning of the story. The difference now is that the narrator (and the reader) knows and understands. The bullets that killed Johannes are Mauser bullets (that is Boer bullets); he died because he was a "National Scout", that is a traitor for Afrikaners, as he was fighting his own people in a British Regiment. What is also important here is that the author-narrator says he acts unconsciously when he turns the frame down, showing he has the same reflex and the same reaction as all the members of the Afrikaner community. Ouma Englebrecht's neurotic attitude can therefore be understood, she is divided between her motherly love for her dead son and the feeling he has done something wrong towards his own people.

The pattern and devices used by Bosman to structure his short stories, when analyzed, reveal what he has in mind. The reader gets the key to what is introduced at the beginning of the story, through a circular development leading to the climactic outcome of the story. The suspense is upheld by random remarks and digressions which seem to imply the plot is not important; the story teller is not in a hurry to reach the conclusion of his narration. In the mode of an oral story telling performed by a "backveld" farmer from the Marico District, who has time to do the telling, Bosman is able to convey what is lurking at the back of Afrikaners' minds (the often unexpressed wounds and suppressed grievances). As opposed to the "The Affair at Ysterspruit" where the narrator is implicitly the author (he was a teacher in the Marico District and collected stories when visiting families), the main narrator of the other stories is a farmer (Oom Schalk Lourens), a fictional character this time who has the exceptional quality of being able to take part in the events narrated in the stories. He is an acute observer of his kinsfolk but also a famous story-teller himself. Bosman's credibility comes from the fact that his narrator is "one of the flock", that is an average Afrikaner, who has indeed survived many dangerous events, but is not the flawless archetypal hero. On the contrary he has little weaknesses, a fact which magnifies his human condition and therefore turns him into a credible character as shown by the following confession:

> It was after the English had taken Pretoria that I first met Karel Flysman (Oom Schalk Lourens said).
>
> Karel was about twenty-five. He was a very tall, well-built young man with a red face and curly hair. He was good-looking, and while I was satisfied with what the good Lord had done for me, yet I felt sometimes that if only He had

given me a body like what Karel Flysman had got, I would go to Church oftener and put more in the collection plate.[25]

The bitterness of war

We do not have space enough to develop the importance of the narrator and his role in the powerful effect conveyed by the story; suffice it to say that the identification of the reader with him is inevitable as he embodies all the positive values that Western Christian societies have developed over in time.[26] People share his weaknesses and petty vision of things. Hence empathy is garanteed with his accounts of sad stories. When he is made prisoner with other members of his commando during the war in "Peaches Ripening in the Sun", it is not his being taken away by British troops that is important for it is a mere pretext to tell a good (though sad) story about a man who became mad: "The way Ben Myburg lost his memory (Oom Schalk Lourens said) made a deep impression on all of us. We reasoned that was the sort of thing that a sudden shock could do to you."[27] The narrative seems to point at the context of war to explain that shock: "There were those in our small section of General Du Toit's commando who recall similar stories of how people in a moment could forget everything about the past, just because of a single dreadful happening"[28]. The reader understands that the story is to unfold around that shock. The usual digressions are present mixing individual and collective history, lighter and darker aspects of the conflict. Schalk Lourens reflects on the miserable state he and his horse are in a few months after the beginning of the war: "For it seemed to me that my horse was far more anxious to invade Natal than I was. I had a good deal on the way to Spioenkop and Colenso. And I told myself that it was because I did not want him to go too fast downhill"[29]. With this amusing description of both his and his horse's state of mind, we learn that he participated in two famous Boer victories which took place at a few days apart by virtue of which the British called that period "Black Week". He then explains that the war subsequently took a bad turn for the Boer commandos: "Many burghers had been taken prisoner. Others had yielded themselves up to British magistrates, holding not their rifles in their hands but their hats. There were a number of Boers, also, who had gone and

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25 H. Charles Bosman, "Karel Flysman", in Stephen Gray (ed), *Makapan's Caves and Other Stories*, London, Penguin Books, 1987, p.54.

26 See Davis Rebecca (2006), *Unstable Ironies; Narrative instability in Herman Charles Bosman's "Oom Schalk Lourens" series*. Master thesis, Rhodes University. http://eprints.ru.ac.za/235/ (January 2007)

27 H. Charles Bosman, "Peaches Ripening in the Sun", in Lionel Abrahams (ed), *Unto Dust*, Cape Town Johannesburg, Human & Rousseau, 1991, p.55.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.* p.57.

joined the English."[30] These few lines point out the reactions of courage, cowardice or duplicity war may trigger. The Boer prisoners (among whose number the narrator will later figure) are the heroes as they fought to the bitter end (hence their name the bitterenders), but there are also those who surrendered (the handsuppers) and the worst, those who actually went over to the enemy (the joiners). This passage is a reminder of all possible attitudes the fighting Boers were confronted to. Later on in the story Schalk Lourens and his brothers in arms are taken prisoner and are lead away to be shipped to St Helena. He comments "A bitter thing about our captivity was that among our guards were men of our own people."[31] Of all bitter aspects of a war, Bosman seems to say that betraying one's people is what Afrikaners most resented[32]. Yet the story features prominently the fact that war does not just kill people, it can also crush those who survive. The narrator recalls that before being captured, he and Ben Myburg were often on guard, and they used to talk. Ben would explain to Schalk what a beautiful farm he had, where he grew peaches, and where his lovely blond wife Mimi lived and that they were not far from his land and he would show it to him. The narrator tried to warn him that the war might have done damage to his farm but Ben Myburg did not think so. The shock of the destruction of his farm made him lose his senses: "And although he must have known too well what to expect, what Ben Myburg saw there came as so much of a shock to his senses that from that moment all he could remember from the past vanished forever."[33] Remembering the past is what is at stake for Bosman, hence a war time shock is among the terrible things that the Anglo-Boer War brought to the Afrikaner people. Although camping in his own partly destroyed orchard, Ben Myburg says: "'It's funny' [...], 'But I seem to remember from long ago, reaching up and picking up a yellow peach, just like that one. I don't quite remember where'"[34] The narrator's comment is: "We did not tell him". There is a sense of propriety for they do not want to further upset their companion by explaining it is his peach he is eating. Then they are taken prisoner. The narrator jokes about it saying they were told to march in order by the English sergeant, something a Boer never did: "It was queer- our having to learn to be soldiers at the end of the war instead of at the beginning". The lighter side is as usual counter-balanced by the terrible ending. As they pass through the heavily guarded

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30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 It seems Bosman was particularly sensitive on the topic of betrayal in war. He writes : "It is a sad reflection that in war mankind is not just crucified, but also betrayed" Herman Charles Bosman, *My Life and Opinion*, Stephen Gray (ed), Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Human & Rousseau, 2003, p.105.

33 *Ibid.* p.59.

34 *Ibid.*

town of Nylstroom, they see a big house in front of which girls and English soldiers are laughing. Some girls go inside with soldiers. Among those who stay outside, there is one who is blond: "'It's funny' I heard Ben Myburg say, 'but I seem to remember, from long ago, a girl with yellow hair, just like that one. I don't quite remember where.'" Considering this scene is the repetition of the orchard scene, the natural conclusion follows "And this time, too, we did not tell him". With this story the emphasis is laid on the terrible ordeals Afrikaners had to face because of the war. Ben Myburg lost his house, his senses and his wife, who in a way turned into a feminine "joiner" as a prostitute for English soldiers.

One last example, probably the most famous from Bosman's canon of Anglo-Boer War short stories, *Mafeking Road*, will help us complete the portrait Bosman drew of the war. The story is based once again on a small archival item which is a path to the past, what the French historian Paul Veyne called a *Tekmeria*[35] (a mark in Greek): an archaeological element which enables one to plunge into past events. Here it is not a photograph, but a family tree, that the narrator is shown by Floris van Barnevelt: "On the wall of Floris's voorkamer is a long family tree of the Van Barnevelts. You can see it there for yourself. It goes back for over two hundred years, to the Van Barnevelts of Amsterdam."[36] The lineage is important in societies whose roots are not originally in the place where they dwell: people are generally proud of their family tree as it is on show, prominently placed for visitors to see. Many immigrants are keen to trace their ancestors (as proved by the success of genealogical societies in the United-States for instance). The sense of belonging is part of the understanding of an individual mental process as Marq de Villiers puts it: "So if we use my own family as a way of dealing with the tribe, it's not because we were essential to the collective history but because longevity counts for something- we were there from the beginning, after all, and some of us will be there until the end..."[37] The tragedy of Mafeking road lies in the fact that the family tree ends with Stephanus van Barnevelt. The Anglo-Boer War is depicted as an abnormal situation which not only cuts lives short, but worse perhaps, interrupts lineage. Ironically Van Barnevelt ancestors have sunk into oblivion as the result of the inroads of insects which have devoured the top of his family tree: "At one time it went even further back, but that was before the white ants started on the top of it and ate away quite a lot of Van Barnevelts". Yet the trauma comes from the other end of the family tree: Floris is called by

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35 Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* Paris, Editions du Seuil, Coll. Points – Histoire, 1979, p.18.

36 Herman Charles Bosman, "Mafeking Road" in *Mafeking Road*, Human & Rousseau Cape Town Johannesburg, 1991, p.43.

37 Marq de Villiers, *White Tribe dreaming. Apartheid's Bitter Roots as Witnessed by Eight Generations of an Afrikaner Family*, London, Peguin Books, 1990, p.XIII.

the narrator "the last of the Barnevelts" (p.42) as his only son and heir died during the war: "Nevertheless, if you look at this list, you will notice that at the bottom under Floris's own name, there is the last entry, 'Stephanus'. And behind the name 'Stephanus', between to bent strokes, you will read the words: 'Obiit Mafeking'." (p.43) The suspense of the story is that few readers know what "obiit" means, and as usual, Bosman's technique is to disclose the answer only at the end of the story. But before that, Oom Schalk Lourens unfolds his narration stating that himself, Floris and Stephanus were in the same commando and went to besiege the town of Mafeking[38]. We find the usual lighter sides when Stephanus brags that what annoys him is that after having taken Cape Town from the British they would have to go overseas to take London. Stephanus is depicted as a merry companion: "Young Stephanus van Barenevelt was the gayest of all" (p.43).

Another funny aspect is that the commando, repeatedly see their officer (the veldkornet) stop to speak to the Black Africans they meet on their way to Mafeking. They understand it is because he does not know his way which is shameful for a Boer officer. The siege of the town of Mafeking takes place, but after a few months, British reinforcements come and the commandos are forced to leave which is another opportunity for the narrator to poke fun at himself and his companions: "And if we had difficulty in finding the road to Mafeking, we had no difficulty in finding the road away from Mafeking. And this time our veldkornet did not need kafirs, either, to point with their fingers where we had to go." (p.44). The narrator explains that the burghers rode very fast away from Mafeking just as the Boer military (usually efficient) technique was to take no risks, ambush the enemy for example and then disappear very quickly. He himself was one of the fastest to get away spurred on by fear, but Stephanus rode even faster, implying he was even more scared. When the commando stops, Stephanus says indirectly he is fed up with fighting and that, much to his fahter's anger, he wouldn't mind giving himself up to the English. The veldkornet tells him it is against military regulations and he could be shot for surrendering to the enemy. Floris expresses the idea that his ancestors had always fought bravely, implying how important lineage was for him: "He said the Van Barnevelts had fought bravely against Spain in a war that lasted 80 years" (p.46). The honour of the family can not be tarnished by weaknesses of the sort Stephanus displays wanting to surrender. Guns are heard and everybody is anxious. This decides things for Stephanus who rides back towards Mafeking "I am going to hands-up to the English" (p.46). The story stops and resumes with events two days later when Floris comes

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38 A famous siege during the war, where British troops under the command of the celebrated General Baden-Powell (who during the siege, is said to have had the idea of the scout movement he later created), were besieged by Boer Commandos from 13 October 1899 to 17 May 1900.

back from having followed Stephanus : "But Floris did not speak about what had happened that night, when we saw him riding out under the star-light, following after his son and shouting to him to be a man and to fight for his country. Also, Floris did not mention Stephanus again, his son who was not worthy to be a Barnevelt." (p.46). Schalk Lourens explains that they were then made prisoners and sent to St Helena, mixing funny portraits (the veldkornet has no kaffir on the island to tell him the way out of the barbed wire (p.46)), and more depressing thoughts: "And we returned to our farms, relieved that the war was over, but with heavy hearts at the thought that it had all been for nothing and that over the Transvaal the Vierkleur would not wave again." (p.46)

The story ends in the usual elliptical way, back to the situation at the beginning that is Oom Schalk Lourens visiting Floris at his place after the war and talking about the family tree. He reminds the reader of what is written next to Stephanus's name: "Obiit Mafeking". The key is given to the reader "Consequently, if you ask any person hereabouts what 'obiit' means, he is able to tell you right away, that it is a foreign word, and that it means to ride up to the English, holding your Mauser in the air, with a white flag tied to it, near the muzzle." (p.47) The symbol of Boer military achievements is here removed from its pedestal as it no longer defends Boer interests. Instead it is used in a shameful way to give up the fight (for the handsuppers) and echoes what the narrator had said earlier in the story: "The stars looked down on scenes that told sombrely of a nation's ruin; they looked on the muzzles of the Mausers that had failed the Transvaal for the first time." (p.44) The dreadful ending is that here again, it is not the British soldiers who brought the Van Barnevelt's lineage to an end but Floris himself, unable to bear the thought of a coward in his family[39]. In a Lacanian perspective the son kills his father symbolically to become a man by opposing him. But the war perverts the scheme. The son leaves the father to "go to the English". The father kills the son. The road to Mafeking means going back and forth along the road to infamy. It is both a personal and a national tragedy, for just as the Boers lost Mafeking, Floris lost his son to get his honour back. The sacrifice of the son seems to be a way to redeem the failure of the siege of Mafeking. The killing of his own son is not held against Floris since he did no more than the Afrikaner code of honour dictated at the time of the Anglo-Boer War. The veldkornet had warned Stephanus about the risks he was taking and when Floris comes back nobody inquires as to what happened, as if the Burghers understood that

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39 There are many accounts of Boers resenting their kinsmen's infamous attitude e.g. Janie Kriegler who despises his cousin, Pieter Bosman and "other low cowards" who surrendered to the "cowardly British nation" (quoted by Ian Uys, *Heidelbergers at the Boer War*, edited by the author, South Africa, 1981. p.131), or Danie Marteens who shot his Brother-in-law, a national Scout after he had been captured (Ian Uys, p.163).

Floris had done his duty. What the narrator really reproaches Floris for is what opens and ends the story, that is, his inability at narrating properly: "But I knew that Floris had a good story, and that its only fault was that he told it badly. He mentioned the Drogevlei School committee too soon. And he knocked the ash out of his pipe in the wrong place. And he always insisted on telling that part of the story that he should have left out." (p.47) That ending to the story is designed to suggest that not only was Stephanus killed by his father, but that Floris's fault is that he should keep the fact quiet. With this story, Bosman implies it is not just Mafeking that was lost and that the war provoked contradictory attitudes which brought deep wounds to the Afrikaners. Because of the war, the Van Barnevelts disappeared. Metonymically the British brought about the downfall of the House of Afrikaner.

The survival of the group

The common attitude of all Ouma Engelbrecht's Afrikaner visitors in "The Affair at Ysterspruit", including the Afrikaner English speaking narrator, who turns over the son's picture, shows there is some sort of collective unconscious (the narrator admits he is hardly aware of what he was doing) as defined by Jung, expressing a shared vision of things as a restricted group. Social psychology has developped the notion of "small group". The group which finds itself in danger will inevitably eliminate all the deviant individuals which, in the eyes of the group, might be a threat. Karel Flysman dies, unlike Stephanus van Barnevelt, not by the hand of a Boer, but by the hand of the enemy. The irony is that he continuously acted as a coward, even pretending he was dead in order to hide, until it was time, for the Boers to retreat and was at that moment he got killed. Oom Schalk Lourens, who tried throughout the story to encourage Karel to act like a man, is sorry as he was helping him to escape when he died: "Often after I have thought of Karel Flysman and of the way he died. I have also thought of that girl he spoke about. Perhaps she thinks of her lover as a hero who laid down his life for his country. And perhaps it is as well that she should think that" (pp.58-59). Cowardice is never seen as a positive attitude in human societies, but for the Afrikaners it was a terrible offence which was punished by death (Karel had escaped the firing squad of his commando after fleeing during a previous skirmish, and had only been saved because the Burghers were too tired and had had enough of shooting at people). With the horrifying ending of the "The Traitor's Wife", we learn his own wife Serafina denounced Leendert Roux, a Boer traitor, who was then executed by Oom Schalk Lourens's commando. Once again the code of honour of the Afrikaner commanded her action. The narrator explains she is a heroine just like the wives of the Voortrekkers during the Great Trek: "The sun was just beginning to rise. And I understood how right Jurie Bekker had been when

he said that she was just like the Transvaal, with the dawn wind fluttering her skirts about her ankles as it rippled the grass. And I remembered that it was the Boer women that kept on when there men folk recoiled before the steepness of the Dragensberg and spoke of turning back." (p.82). Bosman suggests that the war brought about such a situation when a man can become a traitor to his own people. The confrontation ends with no victor but only losers in the shape of the Afrikaners as suggested in "the Rooinek", the story of a group of Boers who is obliged to trek because of the legacy of the war. Oom Schalk Lourens sums up what befell many Boer families, and the special price women had to pay:

> Everything else was gone. My home was burnt down. My lands were laid waste. My cattle and sheep were slaughtered. Even the stones I had piled for the kraals were pulled down. My wife came out of the concentration camp and we went together to look at our old farm. My wife had gone out into the concentration camp with our two children, but she came out alone. And when I saw her again and noticed the way she had changed, I knew that I, who had been through all the fighting, had not seen the Boer War.[40]

Throughout his Anglo-Boer War stories, Bosman's objective was not an attack on the British who brought about the Boer republics's downfall. Even when Schalk Lourens speaks of the fact that most Boer families lost someone in the war and therefore "were bitter against the English"[41], he counterbalances that negative image with the arrival of a kind Englishman, the eponymous character of the story "The Rooinek"[42], who dies in the desert at the end of the story trying to save a Boer baby. There is no Manichean portrayal of "Bad Englishmen" and "good Boers", and when his nephew is executed by a British firing squad for using "dum dum" (forbidden) bullets, he seems rather to lay blame on the war itself and his nephew's choice of that type of bullets when saying fatalistically, perhaps:

> That was the last I ever saw of him. I heard later on that, after taking him prisoner, the English searched Hannes and found dum-dum bullets in his possession. They shot him for that. I was very much grieved when I heard of Hannes's death. He had always been full of life and high spirits. Perhaps Hannes was right in saying that the Lord didn't mind about a little foolishness like dum-dum bullets. But the mistake he made was in forgetting that the English did.[43]

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40 H. Charles Bosman, "The Rooinek" in *Mafeking Road*, Human & Rousseau Cape Town Johannesburg, 1991, p. 125.

41 *Ibid.*

42 "Rooinek" in Afrikaans, means "red neck", the pejorative nickname given by the Afrikaners to the British settlers who would get sun stroke on the back of their heads on account of their light complexion.

43 H. Charles Bosman, "The Rooinek" op. cit. pp.124-125.

The tragic irony here points to the direct responsibility of Hannes and it is only indirectly that "English" wrong doing is alluded to with the portrayal of them as unforgiving people. On the contrary, Bosman's focus is on an exploration of the notion of group (volk). It is an Afrikaner business: a father kills his deserter son (*Mafeking Road*); a wife turns out her joiner husband (*The Traitors Wife*), a national scout is executed (*The Affair at Ysterspruit*), a coward dies (*Karel Flysman*), a "wild" wife becomes a prostitute for the English (*Peaches Ripening in the Sun*). His readers understand that human beings, even their own kinsfolk, can be weak when confronted with existential difficulties that go beyond their capacity of remaining faithful to a certain ideal. Yet the themes that Bosman tackles: the story of the "handsuppers" or worse the "joiners" fighting their "brothers" with the enemy, are bitter themes, part of the Afrikaner mythology and or martyrology of the war, as some stories go, that nearly a hundred years after the end of the war, some families were still ashamed of having "joiner" ancestors[44]. Though Bosman does not blame British people directly, his readership prior to the setting of apartheid, inevitably saw that the British were responsible for the destruction of the long sought, never achieved cohesion and unity of the Afrikaner nation. Bosman's appeal to the Afrikaners is based on the sorrow brought about by the little human dramas triggered by those who failed the Volk, those who rejected the values of the group, thus endangering it. His gaze at past events and mentalities is the key to Afrikaner attitudes at the time Bosman wrote. As Stephen Gray puts it speaking about Bosman: "His main theme is always how the roots of the present lie in the past[45]". This cultural archaeology is undoubtedly what enables us to grasp the reasons of Bosman's success. His bitter irony in the portrayal of the past through anecdotes gives his Afrikaner readership the feeling that they were (are) understood, that the deep wounds linked to their weaknesses are reveiled by an old man (the narrator, Oom Schalk Lourens), a symbol of the African wise man, a Boer soldier who knows because he has survived and can tell the story to civilians who. Telling the story is therefore telling (hidden aspects of) history. The open wounds brought about by their defeat in the Anglo-Boer war, was for the Afrikaners the loss of their independence, but also the subsequent difficulties: the pauperisation of quite a number of Afrikaners who had lost everything during the war (as shown in "the Rooinek", when farmers trek to find a new life); the difficulties in seeing British people being favoured for, or in having to compete with Black

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44 On that topic see Gilles Teulié, *Les Afrikaners et la guerre Anglo-Boer (1899-1902) Etude des Cultures populaires et des mentalités en présence*, Montpellier, Presses de l'université Montpellier III, 2000, and more particularly the chapitre on «Khaki Boers et National Scouts, ou la haine du collaborateur » pp.422 à 427.

45 Stephan Gray, " introduction" in Herman Charles Bosman, *Makapan's Caves and Other Stories*, London, Penguin Books, 1987, p.12

people for jobs they they would not have touched before the war. The Afrikaners' cohesion is of vital importance for them since the survival of the group is linked to its capacity for facing odds. It is a matter of "United we stand, divided we fall".

Conclusion

Bosman died only three years after the official institution of apartheid in 1948 and made it clear that he was against racial segregation as shown in "the White Ant", "Birth Certificate" or the very controversial "Unto Dust", in which white and "kaffir" bones are mixed. He went further, giving due credit to Zulu kings such as Dingane, who, during apartheid were demonized in history books: "Cleopatra was an African. The strategist of Cannae, who employed the flank attack and the pincers movement, and broke a Roman army, was an African. As South Africans, such thoughts should move us. And if we accept Piet Retief as national hero, a true sense of South African patriotism would not allow us to exclude Dingane."[46]. Yet his descriptions of Boer sufferings during the Anglo-Boer War, were not challenged. As André Viola puts it writing of South Africa: "[...]The major difficulty consists in establishing the foundations of a civil society which would be able to overcome the traumas of the past."[47] Overcoming the traumas of the past was indeed the task post apartheid South Africa had to achieve. Bosman stated what the outcome of the Anglo-Boer War had meant for the Afrikaners. Part of their answer was the establishment of apartheid which enabled them to come to terms with the legacy of the war; take revenge on the "Rooineks" and control the black populations.

Bosman's stories frequently open with the abrupt expression ("Oom Schalk Lourens said"). In them Herman Charles Bosman points to the open wounds of the Afrikaners and therefore at the source of their desire to come to terms with their sufferings. He showed forth what was hidden and deep concealed in the heart of his kinsfolk and thereby produced a thorough analysis of their frame of mind. As a literary-historian, he told a version of South African History, hence, as a tribute, we may perhaps redirect his own formula and write: "The Afrikaners (Oom Charles Bosman said)..."

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46 Herman Charles Bosman, *My Life and Opinion*, Stephen Gray (ed), Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Human & Rousseau, 2003, pp.102-103.

47 « La difficulté majeure consiste à établir les bases d'une société civile qui puisse surmonter les traumatismes du passé » André Viola, *J. M. Coetzee, Romancier sud-africain*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997 p.130.

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