

Hedonism in the Margins: Dolf van Coller's *Die Bielebalies*

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Hedonism and Literature

Hedonistic texts form an important part of literary subculture since time immemorial, and also have a marginal presence in South African literature. This article is focusing on the folk novel *Die Bielebalies* (1993) as an important contribution in Afrikaans to this subculture. This importance is foregrounded through the links that is established between it and Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in Rabelais and his world (1984) and Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy as integral to bacchantic rituals in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1956).

Literary hedonism refers to texts in which excessive pleasure is depicted as the highest purpose of life, as the meaning of life itself. Nietzsche refers to it as 'Excess revealed as truth' (1956:46) and as an expression of the 'exuberant fertility of the universal will' (1956:104). In the hedonist text the emphasis is on excessive sex, drinking and eating. This is the material from which Van Coller's *Die Bielebalies* (1993) is constructed, although transposed to the familiar, but hardly explored, Afrikaans context of escort agencies, small-town restaurants and hunting weekends.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1956) is a profound critique of the theoretical person and that, which also emerged in our time as the dominant institutions and discourses: democracy, scientific optimism and utilitarianism. He writes:

Could it be possible that, in spite of all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of a democratic taste, the triumph of optimism, the gradual prevalence of rationality, practical and theoretical utilitarianism, no less than democracy itself which developed at the same time, might all have been symptoms of a decline of strength, of impending old age, and of physiological weariness (1956:21).

Against reason he places wisdom, against optimistic philosophy he places tragedy.

The tragedy, according to Nietzsche, supposes pessimism about human attempts to exert power over nature through reason and the transcendental ego of the individual. In contrast to the logical schematism (1956:91) of reason, expressed through the notion of representation (the depiction of the material through measurement, or in politics where politicians and their parties represent in quantifiable way the aspirations of particular interest groups), tragedy is an expression of wisdom. Wisdom is founded in an acceptance of contradiction as an essential part of nature; it recognizes the instinctual, powers, which transcend the human mind, the unknown and the unconscious. Nietzsche states the possibility that 'Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled?' (Nietzsche 1956:93).

Wisdom is a humble acknowledgement of human helplessness in the context of an illusory world. Hamlet personifies this wisdom and it explains why he cannot act, why he cannot come to a decision. Wisdom is marked by nausea in the tragic hero:

nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint (Nietzsche 1956:60).

Wisdom implies an order that is different from the regime of reason (personified by Socrates and Euripides) with its blue prints for change in the world: 'Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence' (Nietzsche 1956:87) and he refers to Euripides' 'audacious reasonableness' (Nietzsche 1956:84) and 'rationalistic method' (Nietzsche 1956:84).

Despite the 'nausea' at the absurdity of existence, tragedy is marked by a joy in the incomprehensible abundance and fertility of nature. The underlying principle of this abundance, and of life itself, is the mortality of the individual. Death frames individual life as a dream and an illusion.

Reason attempts to reduce the abundant diversity of life to uniformity; the human being as reasonable master over nature becomes the only acceptable image of the human being. This is expressed in petite bourgeois morality plays in which the audience see themselves represented on the stage, a mirror image of themselves and their values:

Through [Euripides] the everyday man forced his way from the spectators' seats onto the stage; the mirror in which formerly only grand and bold traits were represented now showed the painful fidelity that consciously reproduced even the botched outlines of nature (Nietzsche 1956:77).

Oppositions, right and wrong, rather than the acceptance of contradictions form the foundation of petite bourgeois morality. It is therefore a morality of rights. Against

this in tragedy there is no definite right or wrong: 'all that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both' (Nietzsche 1956:72).

Against the petite bourgeois caricature Nietzsche places the drunken satyr of tragedy. Tragedy becomes a product of the dream and of intoxication (Nietzsche 1956:33). Dionysus, the god of wine, is also the god of tragedy:

Either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dyonissian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetting (Nietzsche 1956:36).

Part of the 'self-forgetting' in an intoxicated state, and also important for *Die Bielliebalies* (1993), is the bonding that occurs between human being and human being and between human being and nature (Nietzsche 1956:37). The satyr is an embodiment of this union: he/she is an expression of the joy and abundance of nature:

The metaphysical comfort—with which, I am suggesting ... every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations (Nietzsche 1956:59)

Van Coller's *Die Bielliebalies* (1993) is an expression of the indestructible presence of pleasure in existence, in spite of dominant moral discourses and blue prints and in spite of the life-threatening consequences of the excessive behaviour. The character Vaatjie (meaning wine barrel or tubby) is infected with Aids for instance.

For Nietzsche (1956:61) the satyr is symbol of sexual omnipotence in contrast to the cultured, civilised person, he represents the limits of logic, embodies the wisdom which transcends logic, the wisdom which is associated with art and tragedy. Tragedy is an art form, which expresses the symbiosis of existence and nature. Tragedy is a ritualised perception:

... the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness (Nietzsche 1956:74).

Reason places the human being against nature, it wants to master nature, is a discourse of power, is founded in the transcendental ego of the individual. *Die Bielliebalies* (1993)

work with the contradiction between the human and nature within the institutions of reason: it portrays the satyr, ironically, in the costume of the small-town lawyer. E. Britz (1994) describes, from a feminist perspective, *Die Bieliebalies* (1993) as one of the most chauvinistic, sexist and racist texts in Afrikaans. Feminism, as a political program (like the Christian pietism from which it derives) has a particularly repressive attitude against the portrayal of the human body (especially that of women) as nature, as sexual. It further presupposes the rationalisation of institutions of society on the basis of equality and uniformity.

Bakhtin

Bakhtin's notions in *Rabelais and his world* (1984) relate closely to that of Nietzsche, although it focuses on a different historical period, namely the early Renaissance. In stead of the satyrs of antiquity he refers to the renewing and utopian energy of folk humour. Like Nietzsche (in his arguments against naturalism and literature in the service of the social sciences) he sets humour against the dogmatic bombast of official ideology:

In ... official culture there prevails a tendency toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one single tone of seriousness (Bakhtin 1984:101).

Folk humour, marked by blasphemy, the bodily and the sexual ('revelling in oceans of strong drink, pools of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies'—Bakhtin 1984:xix) affirms the abundance of nature ('The leading themes ... are fertility, growth, and a brimming over abundance'—Bakhtin 1984:19). The feast, which is a celebration of this abundance, is for Bakhtin central to folk culture and points to social renewal: '... for a time (people) entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance'. It points to the abolition of dominant dogmas, it plays with the contradictions between ideal and reality within an existing order, and emphasises the relativity of truths:

All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with [the] pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities (Bakhtin 1984:11).

Folk humour derives from the familiarity of the market-square and is dominated by the portrayal of the grotesque body, the body as fertile nature, as excessive, as open; the mouth, anus and vagina is essential to life as interactive process between inside and outside, human being and human being:

... the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world ... the stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world ... the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking or defecation (Bakhtin 1984:26).

What is high is brought down low:

To degrade ... means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth (Bakhtin 1984:21).

It is the body, as image of collective life, against the bourgeois ego of the individual, that is emphasised:

The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed (Bakhtin 1984:19).

Van Coller's *Die Bieliebalies*: story as feast

As Bakhtin points out carnival originated at the market place, in economic activity. In the exactly hundred episodes of Van Coller's *Die Bieliebalies* (1993) the economic also plays a central role. The characters are broadly divided in two opposing groups as represented by two economically competing law firms: the law firm of Loekie and the one of Buks. But there is also the portrayal of countless subgroups, which have only incidental contact with the law firms. The economic rivalry is responsible for the tension and main story line in the text. It regularly alternates, though, with the escapades of other characters that are not, or only indirectly, involved with the two central opposing groups. Van Coller in this way succeeds to make a whole town part of his book as an extended feast. Feast becomes an expression of the characters' lives. Eating, drinking and sex in excess are the main motifs in the text and is present in every episode. Time and again the sexual is determined by economic motivations, as contained in the image of a 'finger in a wet purse' (1993:68). The economic focus though is completely different from a ponderous naturalistic exploration of social impoverishment; the economy is rather part of fate where characters survive through trickery embedded with humour.

***Die Bieliebalies* as utopian freedom**

Within a context where non-sexist and non-racist ideologies (increasingly expressions ironically of extreme racism and sexism) are dominant dogma, *Die Bieliebalies* (1993) is one of the most liberating texts in Afrikaans due to its utopian perspective. It is a participatory perspective, a worldly perspective which makes it transcend sexism and racism. The narrator as voice of the people does not satirise; as objective omniscient narrator he does not place himself above that with which he is jesting. Through the use of folk speech (jokes, idiomatic expressions, pranks and slang) the narrator identifies himself with the folk; he belongs to the amoral, ambivalent laughter of the people; 'The people's ambivalent laughter ... expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it' (Bakhtin 1984:12).

As expression of the utopian, the texts narrate the highest degree of pleasure possible, the unconstrained freedom that transcends repressive reason. During one of the weekend hunting expeditions the characters 'reached that stage where their behaviour becomes totally uncontrolled' (Van Coller 1993:61).

Regression

The unconstrained freedom (which is also a regression; the savage, which awakens in the overly civilised, the satyr that behind all civilization remains an essential part of humanity) is best depicted in episode 70. In this chapter the 'boys' during a hunting expedition surrender themselves completely to drinking until they were 'blue' (Van Coller 1993:99). They feast for the sake of life. As in primitive rituals they smear themselves with the blood of antelope:

It looks as if they dipped [baptised?] their hands in blood and smeared it across their cheeks and necks. Most of them are naked and the blood lies in strokes across their stomachs and legs. They dance insanely around the fire and sing and scream (Van Coller, 1993:99f).

and:

Joop looks the worst. He drank of the warm antelope blood. His mouth, throat and chest glimmers with blood. He cuts the throat of the first antelope with his sharp Bigfoot Kershaw and then holds his big beer glass for the thick blood to spurt in. Then he adds three double brandies and gulps it away in one draught. Then he taps again and each one had to take a sip (Van Coller 1993:100).

Interesting is the black assistant's commentary on this regression: 'If the white man is like this, then one with a black skin stays far away' (Van Coller, 1993:100).

Death and the highest degree of pleasure

Joop is the character, although not as central as Loekie or Vaatjie, who expresses best the central theme of the text, namely the highest degree of pleasure. His thoughts are focalised as follows:

Oh fuck, it was great, the boys together. A woman will never know what such a weekend alone with one's mates means (Van Collier 1993:105).

Joop also embodies the price that is to be paid for the excessive indulgence, the physical economy of pleasure, but also the unavoidable ritual of nature, namely death. From memories to the weekend, and the pleasure he derives from it, his death flows. His death is a consequence of laughter. The combination of laughter, death and sexuality reminds strongly of Nietzsche's view thereof as origin of tragedy:

He thinks of Bubba's big white drilling bum while he screws, and starts laughing without reason. He laughs and laughs until it changes into a coughing fit. The heart-burn pushes up in his throat. He thinks of all the farm sounds they had to make every time Wynand phoned his wife and he laughs louder. He coughs and coughs and starts to gasp for breath.

And then a terrible burning pain came. He grabs his chest and brakes. The truck slides across the sidewalk against a streetlight (Van Collier 1993:105).

The grotesque and the petite bourgeois

Van Collier (1993:100) uses the word grotesque, which is central in Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, to describe the bodies of his drunken characters. In the grotesque realism of the carnival the focus is on the feasting, eating, drinking, discharging and sexual body. Like Nietzsche in his implied critique of nineteenth-century naturalism, Bakhtin contrasts the petite bourgeois realism of the nineteenth century with the grotesque realism of earlier centuries. He states that grotesque realism was replaced by

moral sententiousness and abstract concepts The result is a broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed. Hence all these sterile images representing 'character', all these professional lawyers, merchants, matchmakers, old men and women, all these masks offered by degenerate, petty realism (Bakhtin 1984:53).

Van Collier, through the use of lawyers and bank managers (therefore figures from the petite bourgeois class) as characters, play with the genre. Without any internal or psycho-

logical characterisation there is no sense of alienation, typical of character depiction of nineteenth century realism, present in this text. There is no guilt and no confessions pointing to the individual bourgeois ego in the text.

The exaggerated physicality of the characters makes them into caricatures, with the emphasis on the repulsive, the degrading, and especially on

those parts of the body that are open to the outside world ... the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (Bakhtin 1984:26).

The grotesque body in its openness to the outside world is best portrayed in the figure of Joop in the hospital 'connected to a diversity of tubes and stabilizing apparatus' (Van Coller 1993:105). This grotesque scene jests with medical science and modern inability to see death as part of life:

[The opposition life and death] is completely contrary to the system of grotesque imagery, in which death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people, but part of life as whole—its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation (Bakhtin 1984:50).

Death is therefore not only a negative fact, but is accepted:

Old Joop died the way he wanted it. After a few drinks, cigar in the mouth, his mates around him and a woman on each arm. I think he is happy where he is now (Van Coller 1993:115).

For Bakhtin (1984:179) there is a point of contact between the physician and the grotesque body ('The body that interests him is pregnant, delivers, defecates, is sick, dying and dismembered ... it is the body as it appears in abuses, curses, oaths and generally in all grotesque images').

Van Coller's characters are marked by typical grotesque contrasts: Joop for instance is described as big in every way ('Everything about him is big: his head, hands, stomach and estate'—Van Coller 1993:11), except for his small penis. This small penis is central in the grotesque portrayal of him having sex with his wife:

He hears Lena opening a Vaseline bottle: automatically he holds his middle finger in the air. He gives an enormous yawn. She twists the bottle around his finger, oils it well. He lies with the back of his hand flat on the bed and the middle finger straight up. He feels how Lena moves across him. He helps a little and then he is in. She is practised and knows exactly what to do. Joop thinks of the hunting planned for the

next weekend on his farm He knows when she is close. He wants to shoot a warthog that weekend He feels Lena jerking (Van Coller 1993:70).

Vaatjie is the other clearly grotesque character. His name meaning 'wine barrel' evokes associations with wine and fat, and reminds of the character Gross Guillaume or Fat William who according to Bakhtin (1984:297) looked like a wine barrel:

this body resembled a wine barrel Thus his figure was the symbol of bread and wine in bodily form. This two-legged creature representing the abundance of earthly goods was extremely popular.

Van Coller (1993:15) describes Vaatjie as follows:

Vaatjie is a block of a man; far over six feet. When he stands you could balance a glass on his stomach. It looks as if he doesn't have a neck. His chin rests on his chest. His head cannot really turn.

Vaatjie is especially interesting as the character that has to regulate the orgies and plan the pleasure. He is described as someone who is 'in' with everybody who is important. He is the one who arranges the hunting trips and is already seen as 'nearly a pimp amongst the whores' (Van Coller 1993:16). At the brothel he organises 'like a cricket captain sending in his players to bat' (Van Coller 1993:85). In the carnivalesque everything is inverted: a prostitute infects the enormous Vaatjie with Aids and he changes into a skeleton.

The New South Africa

Vaatjie's Aids is the consequence of the zenith in his sexual escapades. This story-within-a-story is narrated in episode 96 to Loekie who is pre-occupied with a threatening strike and the temperamental 'double codes' (Van Coller 1993:127) of the new South Africa. In this story Vaatjie is chosen by a 'young thing' with the 'most beautiful and soft body and most beautiful blue eyes that you have ever seen' (Van Coller 1993:128) because 'she only kisses special guys like him' (Van Coller 1993:128). Her vagina becomes grotesque: the place of extreme stimulation, repulsion and fantasy:

And when I was ready, she climbed on top of me. Fuck, Loekie her cunt was tight. Tight but slippery and inside those little hands you always talk about (Van Coller 1993:130).

The 'little hands' refers to Loekie's fantasy and desire to screw a 'coolie maid'

(Van Coller 1993:89) one day, because according to folk tradition they have grotesque vaginas:

They say the Apache women have something like a small hand in there. Just when you enter with your prick this little hand grabs it with soft fingers folding around the head. They say it can make you insane (Van Coller 1993:89).

Earlier in the same chapter there is reference to the sixth whore 'a dark little one with pitch black flickering eyes' (Van Coller 1993:86). When she introduces herself as Brazilian, Wynand shows his relief with the words 'After all not black' (Van Coller 1993:86). The racist abhorrence, but at the same time attraction to the woman, makes the political part of the grotesque game. Loekie whispers to Vaatjie 'That now is how a Black should look like' (Van Coller 1993:86).

The text plays with the political habits of the small town Afrikaner man within the context of a changing South Africa. Mostly Blacks are portrayed as servants and workers in a near-feudal system. It is best illustrated in the ritual joke where a loyal farm worker has to introduce himself at a party as 'I'm Piet, Boss Joop's kaffir' (Van Coller 1993:18). Joop, who himself enjoys this ritual the most, is described as a nationalist who believes 'that there should be a place for Blacks' (Van Coller 1993:17). A racist way of life and political pragmatics are mixed to create funny situations. The new political situation produces possibilities for interesting inversions. In episode 53 Joop is angered by a white foreman whom he scolds as a 'bad, useless fucking white man' (Van Coller 1993:69) and this is followed by the near carnivalesque and feigned appointment of the black Samson.

Representation

Nietzsche referred to the ordinary man who forced his way onto the stage to find there a petite bourgeois image of himself ('civic mediocrity ... was given a voice'—Nietzsche 1956:77). The word 'civic' evokes an image of the petite bourgeois order that became dominant since the French Revolution in the form of modern democracy based on the ideas of representation and individual freedoms and rights. Since then representation can be quantified in terms of numbers: majorities and minorities. Government is therefore, at least hypothetically, no longer arbitrary and unreasonable (the question, though, remains as to what degree a politician can re-present). Both Apartheid and Anti-Apartheid are products of political rationalisation that has its roots in the sciences and its classifying methodologies.

Democracy is underpinned by the disciplinary institutions of reason: education, the law and values such as morality and sobriety.

Die Bielebales (1993) is described by Etienne Britz in a radio review as 'the

most immoral and politically repulsive book that appeared in Afrikaans in many years'. The book can only be considered repulsive if one assumes a representative link between fiction and the social and political reality; the degree of repulsion must be tested against the social reality: the number of readers repulsed. The number of readers of this folk text will therefore be decisive. Apparently from press reports it was a very popular book.

It is especially with reference to the depiction of women that the book is experienced as repugnant (although it describes mainly repugnant male behaviour). The repugnance is defined mainly from an implied moral order founded in feminism: the woman that is depicted as sexual is dehumanised (nature makes the human less human). The woman becomes a victim of a male order.

Charles van Onselen in his historical texts *New Nineveh* (1982) and *New Babylon* (1982) showed how prostitution at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century liberated Afrikaner women economically from the hold of the traditional patriarchal order. This is the material from which Totius constructed his nationalist *Trekkersweë* (1933; first published 1915). In *Die Bielebalies* (1993) it is the economic power accompanying sexuality which are recurrently foregrounded, and which empowers women rather than making them mere victims. The bickering of the male characters with prostitutes is economically founded, so is the use of the waitresses and secretaries of their bodies to achieve their purposes, as is the housewife's acceptance of her shadowy role.

Traditional feminism postulated a homogeneous view of women (a reductive representation). It did not leave much space for a diversity of women's voices; there is no room for the prostitute reduced to mere victim of the male order, to speak for herself. Shanon Bell (1994) pleads against these types of arguments for a pluralist, post-modern and carnivalesque sexual ethics based on democratic tolerance for sexual diversity. According to her sexual acts should be evaluated in terms of the absence of force and the degree of pleasure it gives (Bell 1994:133). For the woman, in the role of the prostitute, pleasure as an experience of power, and can be addictive. Charlotte Davis Kasl (quoted in Bell 1994:133) writes:

The addictive part is the ritual of getting dressed, putting on make-up, fantasizing about the hunt, and the moment of capture. 'To know that you could go out there and they would come running. What power! Men would actually pay for sex' For women prostitution ... that feeling of power, along with the excitement of living on the edge, is one of the hardest things to give up.

The panting novel (hyg roman)

In a certain sense feminism pleads for the revival of chivalry: the new knight is the man that conforms to feminist prescriptions for male behaviour. The panting novel (a

new genre of soft porn in Afrikaans) with its typical idealisation of the sexual situation from a feminine perspective is an expression of this. *Die Bieliebalies* (1993) mocks this genre in the depiction of the character Ben White and his relationship with the attractive widow Ryke. Unlike the other characters White has a 'body like an athlete' (Van Coller 1993:110). He is described as 'courteous' when he drapes a Karakul coat over her shoulders. They eat by candle light, he opens the car door for her, kisses at the end of the night her fingers. In a very civilised way the sexual is continuously postponed. Their relationship becomes grotesque, because it is so different from all the other relationships in the book. At the end, though, Loekie regularly screws Ryke, newly wed to Ben White, in a hotel room.

Conclusion

Die Bieliebalies (1993) is a hedonist text with important philosophical implications. Its links to Bakhtin and Nietzsche made it clear. The discourse of rights, as feminism becomes more dominant, will come increasingly in conflict with the discourse of freedom (especially the freedom of speech). *Die Bieliebalies* (1993) is a celebration of excessive male freedom, but the women are more than just victims in this celebration. They are empowered in particular ways. Because literature is not reality, but always implies an imaginary and imaginative world, the pleasure it gives does not necessarily have gender differences.

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