

# Douglas Blackburn and the Anglo-Boer War

Elmar Lehmann

## I

Even before the peace treaty of Vereeniging was signed in May 1902, a substantial number of Boer War novels had already been published. Francis Dodsworth's *Gilbert Logan, V.C. A Tale of the Boer War 1899-1900* and Ernest Glanville's *The Despatch Rider* appeared in 1900. In two successive years George Alfred Henty produced *With Buller in Natal or A Born Leader* (1900) and *With Roberts to Pretoria: A Tale of the South African War* (1901), and perhaps, one should not forget that Henty (*The Young Colonists* 1898) and Henry Rider Haggard (*Jess* 1887) had already dealt with the first Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881, when the Transvaal regained the independence it had lost with the British annexation of 1877.

During and immediately after the second war a flood of diaries and memoirs, reports and histories was published. The English editions of Christiaan de Wet's and Ben Viljoen's war memoirs came out in 1902 and, almost concurrently, in German translations. In 1900 Winston Churchill's reports appeared in book-form under the title *From London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*, and in the same year, the first volumes of *The Times History of the War in South Africa* and of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Great Boer War* were added to an already long list of Boer War texts (cf. Pakenham 1979:623-632).

Douglas Blackburn must have had an extensive knowledge of the literature of the war, fictional and non-fictional. In many respects his *A Burgher Quixote* (1903) is a 'hidden polemic' in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1984:181-204), where the discourse of the novel 'senses alongside itself another literary discourse' (Bakhtin 1984:184). Blackburn's novel is directed against the brand of novels perhaps best epitomised by those mentioned above and also, in Blackburn's own words, by 'the foolishness of the attitude of cocksureness' (Blackburn 1978:23) observable in so many English texts written before and during the war, not least, and perhaps not surprisingly, in Churchill's grandiloquent and self-aggrandising reports. When one looks back upon the Boer-War novels now that the centenary of that seminal event in

South African history is over, one can only agree with one of the earliest reviewers of the novel (*Natal Witness* 4 July 1903), who predicted:

Among the scores of novels written in the late war the *Burgher Quixote* will stand out foremost in its power of literary expression and striking humorous portraiture (Blackburn [1903]1984:xi).

## II

In the 'Author's Note' prefixed to *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp. A Tale of Transvaal Officialdom* (1899), Blackburn quotes a lengthy passage from a pre-publication notice in an unnamed Transvaal newspaper, which Blackburn himself probably invented the better to advertise his own qualifications as an expert on the Boer:

The novel is absolutely the first attempt on the part of a qualified writer to depict the Transvaaler [sic] as he is under the new dispensation. Globe trotters by the score have given more or less inaccurate pictures of the Boer on the farm and the veld of Cape Colony, but no one has shown him in the town and in the official ring—the Boer that is destined for a long time to loom large in the public eye at home ... (Blackburn 1899:ii).

Rider Haggard must have been one of those globetrotting and self-stylised experts whose 'frothy nonsense' the really 'qualified writer' such as Blackburn despised and repeatedly denounced in the *Transvaal Sentinel* (Blackburn 1978:11). In 1877 Haggard was a member of Sir Theophilus Shepstone's delegation to Pretoria, which successfully negotiated the annexation of the Boer republic. On the eve of that event he wrote an essay ('The Transvaal'), published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, in which he vehemently pleaded for the annexation of the republic, because, he argued, what the Transvaal needed, was 'a strong government, peace, justice and security', which, for him, only the British could guarantee (Haggard 1877: 78). Immediately after his return to England (1881), his book-length study of *Cetywayo and His White Neighbours* (1882) appeared with a long chapter on the Transvaal, where he severely criticised William E. Gladstone, the Liberal prime minister (1880-1885), whose cowardly South African policy had, in Haggard's view, led to the British defeat in the first Anglo-Boer War and had thus betrayed the great civilising mission of the British in South Africa. This chapter was then reprinted separately under the title of *The Last Boer War* on the eve of the second Anglo-Boer War (October 1899). Blackburn's verdict on Haggard's Transvaal expertise is perhaps best summed up in an article in the *Transvaal Sentinel* of 1896:

To the frothy nonsense talked at the South African Writer's Dinner in London the other evening Mr Rider Haggard the fiction manufacturer contributed more than his share .... Mr Haggard is a very entertaining writer, but when he attempts to discuss serious problems his opinions are worth no more than those of any Tom, Dick or Harry who reads his foreign newspaper with average intelligence. Mr Haggard expressed his desire to see the English flag again floating at Pretoria where, said he, it used to be; but he omitted to mention that the reason it no longer flaunts there is because the British Government proved itself utterly incompetent to do anything in the shape of governing beyond paying the salaries of idle ornamental officials of whom Mr Haggard was one (Blackburn 1978:11).

The 'fiction manufacturer[']s' novel of the first Anglo-Boer War, *Jess*, although certainly not an immediate target of Blackburn's attack, can nevertheless serve as an excellent foil to *A Burgher Quixote*, the more so, because Haggard's romances and political pamphleteering must have been very much on Blackburn's mind during this period (cf. Gray 1984:55-61). *Jess* significantly opens with the Transvaal entering history as yet another of England's 'lusty child[ren]' (Haggard 1877:79), and with Captain John Niel entering the Transvaal as a coloniser. The novel ends, when a completely disillusioned and utterly disgusted Niel leaves the once again independent Transvaal for England. While the historical events between annexation (1877) and independence (1881) are kept in the background, the novel focuses on a duel between two characters, who are clearly meant to be representative. Captain Niel is the perfect, if rather pedestrian English gentleman, not the Allan Quatermain type of hunter-adventurer, but rather an almost domesticated, if certainly highly competent and brave hero; Frank Muller, on the other hand, is (one is tempted to say: naturally) of mixed descent, half Boer and half English: 'You see (says one of the English characters in the novel), you can deal with a Boer and you can deal with an Englishman, but cross-bred dogs are bad to handle' (Haggard 1887:1,69). Muller is the absolute villain of the story, highly intelligent and pathetically superstitious, callously brutal and incredibly ambitious and, on top of all that, he is the richest farmer in the district and a highly influential politician in the republic.

As a lord of misrule and a satanic hero, slavishly followed by a fiendish black servant, Muller represents a loosely-structured and well-nigh chaotic community of independent-minded people against Niel's closely-knit society based on class. He represents anarchy against civilisation, and he stands for the Transvaal's pre- or perhaps subhistoric status against England's high historical mission. Through the transposition of the war events into a duel of representative figures Haggard manages to have the evil powers of anarchy destroyed (Muller is killed, and Niel

victorious), and to blame the English defeats at Laing's Nek and Majuba Hill in January 1881 on the cowardly and corrupt Liberal government at home.

In *A Burgher Quixote* Blackburn, the 'qualified writer', who knows the Transvaal from within, directly confronts and denounces the master narrative of an English high mission, while *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* had done this only indirectly a few years earlier.

### III

... my great object .... is to show how the character of the Transvaal Afrikander has been influenced for evil by the combined wickedness of the English Uitlander and Hollander ... (Blackburn 1899:vii).

In this way, Sarel Erasmus, the first-person narrator employed by Blackburn in *Prinsloo*, introduces 'the vindication of the character of a father of his country' (Blackburn 1899:v), his eponymous father-in-law, Piet Prinsloo. When Erasmus reappears as the narrator and protagonist of the Boer War novel, *A Burgher Quixote*, he confesses:

Looking back upon my public career, I can now see that often, without knowing it, I was a great and useful agent for bringing together the two races, Englander and Afrikander .... But while I have just cause for feeling aggrieved at the treatment I have received at the hands of Englanders, it is against my late countrymen that I feel the greatest anger .... The mistakes I have made—and I admit that they are many—will help the world to know the real character of many of my countrymen, among whom I have been a Don Quixote, fighting on behalf of Great Britain against the folly and ignorance that have caused such loss and suffering (Blackburn [1903]1984:14f).

In the three novels, which make up the Sarel-Erasmus trilogy (with the story of a visit to England in *I Came and Saw* (1908) added to *Prinsloo* (1899) and *A Burgher Quixote* (1903), Erasmus's dominant characteristics are his inconsistency and muddled thinking, combined with an almost pathetic and certainly quixotic tendency to interpret whatever happens to him and around him in such a way that it conforms to his prejudices and to the respective roles he believes he is playing at a given moment. The above quoted passages from the narrator's 'Forewords' (sic) to *Prinsloo* and from the opening chapter of *A Burgher Quixote* already clearly indicate that the narrator's self-stylisation as an important agent and competent writer is ludicrously confused and full of contradictions. Whose folly is he talking about, that of his countrymen alone or that of both sides? What are the mistakes he has made,

and what is, in his mind, the real character of his countrymen? If his countrymen have been corrupted by English 'uitlanders' and 'Hollanders' (as Dutch foreigners appointed to senior positions in President Paul Kruger's Transvaal administration were called), and if he has good reason to resent the treatment he received at the hands of both the English and his Afrikaner countrymen, why, we have to ask ourselves, does he side with the British, and does he really? The reader is thus alerted to Erasmus's unreliability as a narrator and his incompetence as a political agent. One will therefore read the novel as a 'double-voiced discourse', defined by Bakhtin (1984:197) as a discourse, in which

... each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to [an] invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.

Making use of the types of 'double-voiced discourse' described by Bakhtin (1984: 199), we can classify Erasmus's story as a 'polemically colored autobiography' in the sense that the reader will see through Erasmus's 'word' and not only confront it with the discourse on (the Anglo-Boer) war, but also detect another person's 'word'. Let me illustrate my point. Erasmus not only calls himself 'Don Quixote', but, toward the end of the novel, compares his situation with that of two famous Englishmen:

John Bunyan, Sir Walter Raleigh, and I are striking examples of the blessing that prison-life may become to those who know how to use and value it by thinking out, properly and fully, thoughts that have stayed but a short time in the heart during freedom ... (Blackburn [1903]1984:244).

Bunyan (1628-1688) was persecuted as a religious non-conformist and, while in prison, completed the first part of his famous *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), while Raleigh (1552-1618), allegedly for his part in a conspiracy against James I, was imprisoned (and later executed) in the Tower, where he wrote (the first and only part of) *A History of the World* (1614), which was immensely popular in the seventeenth century. Although the three narrative situations may not be dissimilar, since all three writers are victims of the powers that be, what is highlighted here, however, is the enormous discrepancy between Erasmus on the one hand and the two English authors on the other. Compared with the high seriousness of Christian's allegorical journey to Heavenly Jerusalem in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Erasmus's wavering and blundering seem to be nothing but a parodic replica, and compared with the famous courtier's ambitious and elegant universal history, in which he probably co-operated with some of his most learned contemporaries, Erasmus's narrative is an inept performance. Where Bunyan and Raleigh are in complete control of their material

and competently follow their overall designs, Erasmus seems to be forever out of his depth, not only in every single episode he recounts, but also regarding the structure and purpose of his war memoir as a whole. Insofar as Erasmus, matched against Bunyan and Raleigh, is seen to be ill-equipped and ineffectual, and his narrative is meant to be read as a bungling performance, the reader will assume the presence of another voice, which indirectly, and very often through oblique allusions, puts forward a critique of Erasmus, and of the warring parties.

Imprisoned by the English as a rebel and with all his plans come to nought, Erasmus may still harbour delusions of grandeur, but his naiveté, his would-be cleverness and pitifully limited knowledge characterise a narrator who does not know—and seems to be unable to realise—that he produces a text which constantly ridicules his own, the narrator and protagonist's aspirations. At the same time, and arguably not unlike Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Schweik* (1923), Erasmus's point of view serves to create a satiric or, to use Bakhtin's terminology yet again, a 'carnivalistic' presentation of the Anglo-Boer War (Bakhtin 1984:122-137), making 'familiar relations strange' (Holquist 1990:89).

With blinkered perspective, Erasmus the narrator tells the story of his war adventures as a series of episodes which invariably follow the same pattern. Like Bunyan's Christian he finds himself among the heathens of Vanity Fair, beset by temptations of all kinds, but unlike Christian he will give in to each and every temptation that comes his way. He believes that he is surrounded by Boers as well as British, whose sole purpose he automatically assumes to be to counteract his grand scheme (i.e. the 'bringing together the two races, Englander and Afrikander'), and whom he expects to misconstrue his every word and action. The British will even try and imprison him as a traitor, when, toward the end of the novel, he gives himself up to them.

A close look at one of these episodes, the Bokman's Drift adventure (Blackburn [1903]1984:165ff, chapter X) will illustrate the narrator-protagonist's characteristically distorted vision of himself and the resulting 'carnivalistic' and satiric presentation of the war. When the Transvaal's Commandant-General, Piet Joubert, appoints him commandant of a Boer commando, a rather unwilling (because secretly pro-British) Erasmus not only 'learns ... that being exalted does not always bring happiness' (title of chapter VIII, Blackburn [1903]1984:129), but has to realise, much to his chagrin, that it is by no means his military record which induced Joubert to appoint him, but rather Katrina, his much-loathed intended, whose ambition it is to marry a famous soldier and who exerted her influence with the general. But worse is to come. Only when he spreads the news that his commando is 'going to catch cattle and bring in loot' (Blackburn [1903]1984:136), does he manage to find Burghers willing to join him. But here, as ever, Paul du Plooy, the

Sancho Panza to Erasmus's Don Quixote, steps in to console him and to explain to him the hidden meaning of the situation with the help of the Old Testament:

Sarel, you are like Moses with the children of Israel in the wilderness. They are discontented and rebellious, and the false gods they worship are cattle. But I am Joshua, and you know that he was oprecht, and made the paths smooth for Moses (Blackburn [1903]1984:145).

While du Plooy's remark flatters Erasmus, adding Moses to Bunyan and Raleigh as his equals, and likens a famous story to the situation of the Boers, it once again foregrounds the incongruity of the comparison. Erasmus's 'children of Israel' are certainly a sorry lot. Always dissatisfied with their commandant and always quarrelling, they cannot even understand each other so that, more often than not

... there was babel [sic] broke loose, for my Burghers were English, Scotch, Irish, German, Hollander, Danish, Russian, French, Peruvians, and many other nations not found in any postal directory (Blackburn [1903]1984:144).

Worse still, poor Erasmus, who one moment proudly asserts that 'we Boers on commando do not take orders; we call it advice' (Blackburn [1903]1984:136f.), the next moment finds himself in a situation over which he has no control. He has hardly left the laager with his commando, when enigmatic Andries Brink, the 'clever plotter' (Blackburn [1903]1984:150), takes over. Brink follows his own hidden agenda and, whenever Erasmus believes that he has finally detected his 'friend's' ulterior motives, we may be sure that he is in for yet another unpleasant surprise. At Bokman's Drift, Brink single-handedly commandeers Erasmus's commando and traps a transport on its way to the British army. He then manages to escape with the cattle, which he will re-sell to the English, with only the bare promise to share the profit with the burghers or, at least, with his particular friend, Erasmus, a promise he has, of course, absolutely no intention of keeping. The war as a patriotic defence of the Boer republic's independence on the one hand, and as the British civilising mission on the other, is thus reduced to a cattle-thieving expedition.

The assault on the English transport itself is completely in character with the incompetence of the actors involved. It is a veritable feat of military blunders, on the side of the undisciplined burghers as well as the inexperienced tommies. In the end, even Erasmus has to admit that he

... never learned properly how the surrender (of the English) came about, but from what I could see and heard, it was a case of mistakes on both sides (Blackburn [1903]1984:173).

No wonder, then, or perhaps most surprisingly, everybody escapes more or less unscathed, not counting, of course, the few severely wounded and killed 'Kafirs' (Blackburn [1903]1984:173), as Erasmus, in line with common racist parlance, calls the black servants.

The Bokman's Drift episode clearly produces the 'carnivalistic' through intertextuality. Instead of presenting war in the conventional way as heroism with predictable results—or, to be more precise, as British or Boer heroism and British or Boer victories—war is here depicted as rather carefree incompetence with an unexpected, at least an undeserved, outcome. While Henty and Glanville in their novels systematically—or shall I say, desperately—try to shut out or, at least, conceal accidents in the service of the heroism they present, in Blackburn's *A Burgher Quixote* accidents reign supreme, emphasising that victories as well as defeats are nothing but the surprising results of incompetence. Erasmus unwittingly and almost innocently displays the pretentiousness of heroism as incompetence, and *A Burgher Quixote* denounces heroism and the ideology of a high mission, be it in the name of civilisation or of a promised land, as thinly-disguised and rather pathetic (self-)deception on a grand scale.

Even Sarel Erasmus who follows his grand scheme of bringing together 'Englander and Afrikander' and who, at the same time, allows himself to be manipulated by shady Andries Brink cannot but realise that he is, indeed, easily identifiable as a fence-sitter and a coward, unwilling to fight, yet bent on profit. Not surprisingly, then, Erasmus has to defend himself against the misrepresentations of his fellow burghers who frequently accuse him of being a spy (e.g. early on in the novel in the hilarious episode of the poisoned whisky, Blackburn [1903]1984:39-54), and he must almost constantly try to disguise his pro-British feelings, e.g. as a particularly efficient and brave commandant whose successes, however, are usually prearranged by Brink. All this creates laughter, because the reader is constantly made aware of the processes of 'othering' at work here. Compared with Raleigh or seen in the role of a Moses, Erasmus becomes a pitiable and laughable sight. When we observe him unsuccessfully trying to hide his pro-British feelings and laboriously trying to explain to us why and how he does it, we cannot but see him as a pathetic and ridiculous character. In addition, Erasmus the narrator, always willing to confide in the reader, unwittingly allows us to laugh at his rather threadbare disguise, at his proudly advertised education and his pathetically high ambition.

#### IV

The satire in *A Burgher Quixote* may end here, but there is more to the novel than the comedy of the narrator-protagonist's pretensions and the satire of a war as large-scale cattle-thieving. When Sarel Erasmus likens himself to John Bunyan and Sir Walter



Raleigh, when he sees himself as Christian (*Pilgrim's Progress*) or Don Quixote and, albeit perhaps not fully aware of all the implications, when he accepts being seen as Falstaff (Blackburn [1903]1984:111), we laugh, because we notice the discrepancy between Erasmus and his role-models. But we also realise that Erasmus's pride in his excellent education (he can, after all, read and write and knows English) and his insistence on the important role he has to play in the history of 'Englander and Afrikaner' are the result of a deep-seated uncertainty.

The story Erasmus feels compelled to tell us is a story dominated and permeated by fear, and even he himself has to admit that he 'suffer[s] the pains of uncertainty and hope' (Blackburn [1903]1984:306). In *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp*, and much more explicitly in *A Burgher Quixote*, we meet Erasmus the Afrikaner between veld and town, between a rural past and an urban present, between an Afrikaner past of communal independence and a British present of capitalist domination. Erasmus's position of in-between-ness is elaborately delineated through the configuration of characters and the progress of the story. Paul du Plooy, Katrina and Ben Viljoen, in their different ways, represent Afrikanerdom and the past and, one assumes, a lost cause against Andries Brink, who is of course British, and his completely a-moral and a-national capitalist craftsmanship. Bible-reading, sermonising, opinionated, and at the same time eminently practical, Paul du Plooy is the excellent (though at times rather rash) marksman, who manages to push even cunning Andries Brink to the edge of defeat. Katrina, Sarel's intended, will follow time-honoured Boer traditions and in the end marry 'a cousin making his third wife and the stepmother to sixteen children' (Blackburn [1903]1984:343). Finally, although kept in the background, there is Ben Viljoen, the fighting spirit behind the Boer commandos and, naturally, Erasmus's mortal enemy. Erasmus's relationship with these three characters is clearly dominated by fear. He is afraid of du Plooy's endless preaching as well as self-righteous meddlesomeness, although he desperately needs the wily old man's advice. He tries to avoid Katrina's manipulative energy, but cannot really forget her claims on him, while Viljoen's presence and military competence simply terrify him. Although he repeatedly and quite consciously tries to distinguish himself from his uncivilised countrymen (he is the narrator who never lets us forget that he can tell a story in English), Erasmus finds it extremely difficult to extricate himself from his Afrikanerdom. After all, it is only at the very end of the novel that he manages to change sides, without, however, being able to convince the British of his services in their favour. Andries Brink, like Viljoen, terrifies Erasmus, who 'ever felt towards him that meekness one always feels in the presence of strong and masterful people' (Blackburn [1903]1984:302)—a remark which accurately describes all Erasmus's relations with other characters. But while Viljoen's is a force Erasmus can at least understand and, to a certain extent, even evade, Brink is absolutely beyond him and, indeed, remains an enigma right up to the end of the

novel. For all du Plooy and Erasmus know, Brink may as well be an 'oprecht Natal Burgher' as a 'renegade Transvaal Boer' (Blackburn [1903]1984:322,87), and of course, he is neither. Erasmus's uncertainty and fear, then, result from his being displaced. He has left the veld, but has not yet arrived in the town. He wishes to discard his Afrikaner past, but cannot grasp the British present.

In one of those rare moments, when satire abandons its veiled voice and comes out in the open with a more or less direct statement of its true concerns and values, Brink, in a long conversation with an old acquaintance, Mark Capper, the prospector, looks back on his career. Brink confides that he is notorious Sailor Robinson and, under many aliases, has moved from 'illicit diamond buying at Kimberley' to become a 'contractor to the troops in three native wars', a 'slave-dealer, otherwise native labour agent' and, 'grandest of all, purveyor of arms to the native races' (Blackburn [1903]1984:323). With surprising honesty and perspicuity, he sums up what he has brought to South Africa:

Few Boers ever met me without being the worse for it in property and morals, for I helped to sow the seeds of race hatred that has brought about the war, and will end in the absorption of Boerdom. That is where my patriotic British sentiment is fed up. What I don't like is the knowledge that I have helped to spoil a promising race. The Boer today, Mark, is only what men like me have made him (Blackburn [1903] 1984:323f).

It is of course Sarel Erasmus who epitomises Sailor Robinson's 'Boer today', and it is the uniform he buys, which perfectly and tragically epitomises the narrator-protagonist's precarious position of in-between-ness. While he tries to escape from domineering Katrina Erasmus, he falls in love with jilting Charlotte, who is not only Brink-Robinson's Afrikaner stepdaughter, but who also, and characteristically, succeeds where Erasmus miserably fails. She manages to shed Boerdom for England by marrying an English captain. To impress Charlotte, Erasmus buys himself a splendid second-hand uniform which 'had been made for the chief sanitary inspector of Johannesburg' (Blackburn [1903]1984:248). Wearing the uniform 'that would shame a Portuguese field-marshal' (330), Erasmus looks like 'a London postman or a Natal police superintendent' (318), like a 'German or Russian' or even like a 'Japanese attaché', but, he tells us: 'Nobody would take me for a Boer' (327).

While Sailor Robinson successfully and self-confidently hides his identity behind innumerable aliases, Sarel Erasmus, not even really knowing that he disguises himself, uses the uniform to express an identity (the civilised, educated Boer) which simply is not there. Without realising that he has been uprooted, but with all the accompanying fear and uncertainty of uprootedness and in-between-ness, Erasmus as the narrator and protagonist of *A Burgher Quixote* embodies the plot that is outlined

in the Sailor Robinson/Mark Capper conversation: the end of Boerdom which, for Blackburn, came with the second Anglo-Boer War.

## V

Within the specific situation of the early years of the twentieth century *A Burgher Quixote* squarely confronts the prevailing adventure-cum-high-mission type of novel written by English or South African authors such as Henty or Glanville. Against the British imperial voice Blackburn, the 'qualified writer', introduces the voice of the Afrikaner—an Afrikaner, however, who is the representative of an already lost heritage and at the same time the victim of British imperialism represented by Sailor Robinson. In Robinson's perspective, which seems to be Blackburn's, the story Erasmus tells us turns into a plot, the narrative of the demise of Afrikanerdom brought about by British corruption.

Erasmus's 'polemically colored autobiography' does indeed confirm Robinson's interpretation. The comedy of Erasmus and of his illusory hope for a union of 'the two races, Englander and Afrikaner' as well as the satirical presentation of the Anglo-Boer war reveal Blackburn's uncompromising attack on British imperialism and radical critique of the (mainly British) fiction manufacturers' war novels. For Erasmus there seems to be no hope, only a future of distorted vision and alienation; he seems to be unable to understand, while the imperialist criminal, despite his occasional perspicuity, seems to be ineluctably chained to the corruption of his own making.

Fachbereich Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaften  
Universität Essen

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*Elmar Lehmann*

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