Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek (1827-1875): His Contribution to the Study of Southern African Cultures[1]

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Jakob Grimm (1785-1863) and his brother Wilhelm (1786-1859) have become a household name through their collection of fairy tales (1812 & 1815:Vols. 1 & 2); they laid the foundation for modern Germanic Philology through their research in the fields of Mythology and Comparative Linguistics, which resulted in among others two volumes of *Deutsche Sagen* (German Sagas), a *Deutsche Grammatik* (German Grammar) and the first three volumes of the thirty-two volumes strong *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (German Dictionary) completed in 1960—in much the same way Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek has made an opening for the study of African Languages and Literatures. Born into a family of scholars at a time when Goethe (1749-1832) and Hegel (1770-1831) were still alive; a contemporary of Marx (1818-1883) and Darwin (1809-1882); with first hand experience of the German Revolution of 1848 in Berlin, where he had contact with Jacob Grimm who was then delegated to the first but short-lived German Parliament in Frankfurt—he was formed in his methods, thoughts, ideals and values by a soundly founded democratic tradition of scholarship. This is the first of a series of papers examining these roots through Bleek's early publications as well as unpublished documents with the aim of highlighting a significant intercultural exchange between Europe and Southern Africa in the nineteenth century, the extent and importance of which is only being fully realised now.

My own interest in Wilhelm Heinrich Bleek the philologist, was created through my interest in medieval literature. I thought it fascinating to enter the mind of people of a world some 800 years old, simply by reading their literature—treaties, epics, poetry, romances ... and I say 'simply' because a good many pieces of this literature, especially the romances, are so very enjoyably readable—to me that is, and they are easy to understand—in terms of their own structure which they are not shy to hide.

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Medieval romances I would call mythological fairy tales, the dividing element between the mythological and the fairy tale being the ferment of christianity in its various substitutions. Through the presence of Christ's love, blood and redemption and its substitution through courtly love, jousting and rewards, the heroic tale of old is halted and transformed into something new: the tale is split into two; two heroes, Parzival and Gawain, doubling the same path into two different ways of adventures with one sanctification in the end only. The mythological/heroic and the fairy tale/new/modern held apart and in balance.

Not so simple of course is the task of approximating the particular mindset of those people, some 800 years ago, the emotional contours of their producing and reproducing such literatures and how they were meant to perhaps facilitate them as mindsetting tools. But that might after all be too trivial a question within postulates of postmodernity where there is no apparent case for teleology.

Through further exploration into the realm of fairy tales proper—i.e. proper within the context of Germanic philology and there in the first instance relating to the collection of folklore material by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm—I came upon the equally famous collection of Southern African Folklore—*Specimens of Bushmen Folklore* collected by W.H.I. Bleek, Ph.D. and L.C. Lloyd, edited by the latter, London 1911. In paging through, two texts held my initial attention and have subsequently never failed to touch me; I quote from the translation into English. The first text of Bleek/Lloyd's *Specimens* is called '//Kabbo's Capture and Journey to Cape Town'. First Account (given in May 1871):

> I came from that place, I came (here), when I came from my place, when I was eating a springbok. The Kafir took me; he bound my arms. ( ) We (that is, I) and my son, with my daughter's husband, we were three, when we were bound opposite to (?) the wagon, while the wagon stood still. We went away bound to the Magistrate; we went to talk with him; we remained with him.
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> We were in the jail. We put our legs into the stocks. The Korannas came to us, when our legs were in the stocks; (we were stretched out (?) in the stocks. The Korannas came to put their legs into the stocks; they slept, while their legs were in the stocks. They were in the house of ordure (?). While we were eating the Magistrate's sheep, the Korannas came to eat it. We all ate it, we and the Korannas.
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> We went; we ate sheep on the way, ( ) while we were coming to Victoria; our wives ate their sheep on the way, as they came to Victoria.
>
> We came to roll stones at Victoria, while we worked at the road. We lifted stones with our chests; we rolled great stones. We again ( ) worked with earth. We carried earth, while the earth was upon the handbarrow. We carried earth; we loaded the wagon with earth; we pushed it. Other people walked along. We were pushing the wagon's wheels; we were pushing; we poured ( ) down the earth; we pushed it back. We again loaded it, we and the Korannas. Other Korannas were carrying the handbar-

row. Other people (i.e. Bushmen) were with the Koranna; they were also carrying earth; while the earth was upon the handbarrow. They again came to load the handbarrow with earth.

We again had ( ) our arms bound to the wagon chain; we walked along, while we were fastened to the wagon chain, as we came to Beaufort, while the sun was hot. They (our arms) were set free in the road. We got tobacco from the Magistrate; we smoked, going along, with sheep's bones. We came into Beaufort jail. The rain fell upon us, while we were in ( ) Beaufort jail.

Early (the next) morning, our arms were made fast, we were bound. We splashed into the water; we splashed, passing through the water in the river bed. We walked upon the road, as we followed the wagon, while the wagon went first. We walked, following the wagon, being bound, until we, being bound, came to the Breakwater.( ) On the way, we ate sheep as we came to the Breakwater; we came (and) worked at it.

( ) A white man took us to meet the train in the night. We early sat in the train; the train ran, bringing us to the Cape. We came into the Cape prison house when we were tired, we and the Korannas; we lay down to sleep at noon.

My first reading is disturbed/interfered/masked by a reading evoked and remembered: Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* (1952):

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz
Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken [...].

Black milk of dawn we drink her at dusk
we drink her at midday and morning we drink her at night
we drink her and drink
we are digging a grave in the sky one does not lie tight there
A man stays in the house who plays with the snakes who writes
who writes when it darkens to Germany your golden hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of the house and the stars are glistening he whistles for his dog
he whistles for his jews for them to dig a grave in the earth

> he commands us let's fiddle for a dance
> Black milk of dusk we drink you at night
> we drink you in the morning and at midday we drink you at night
> we drink and drink [...](a.t.).

I think it is the simplicity of rhythm, the naive but pleasant flow and ebbing of words, the unsureness of a final meaning that I experience here and this experience has a ring of trueness to it and I think it is because of its non-proclamation of truth. This text-induced experience suggests to me a particular reality which is present in the text but not entirely; which is there within myself but not exclusively there either; nor does it exist within the speaker's mind alone—it is a shared reality which can only become real when and while it is shared. It is a reality in waiting. A reality which will become true if it is not invoked again and again and will simply fall away and be replaced by other realities if not invoked again and again.

My second reading takes //Kabbo's account of capture and journey to be literature and, well, a piece of as much a mythological as of a fairy tale nature. Why? There is a feeling of wellness with the hero, a feeling of strength, of focus and directedness. There is a hero to begin with. And there he is following a path set out for him, to be followed, for him to see: as if it was his real life—which it is as much as it is not—because his world and the world of these adventures do not coincide, they are not really the same, even though they are very much what they are: capture, imprisonment, hard labour .... How the two are brought together one does not know: the element of strangeness: being estranged from one's place in a way ultimately purposeful, yet beyond the hero's own reasoning—that is fairy tale stuff, that is mythological material because it contains duplicity, the otherness, the other side of that that does happen and it points towards an end, an end that will become the beginning of a new tale—in other words: my second reading of //Kabbo's 'Capture and Journey to Cape Town' takes it for me into the frame of listening to a medieval romance.

The second text I want to quote from Bleek/Lloyd's *Specimens* is *//Kabbo's Journey in the Railway Train (From Mowbray to Cape Town and back.)*

> I have said to thee that the train (fire wagon) is nice. I sat nicely in the train. We two sat in (it), we (I) and a black man.( )
>
> A woman did seize my arm; she drew me inside, because I should have fallen, therefore she drew me in. I sat beside a black man; his face was black; his mouth (was) also black; for they are black.
>
> White men are those whose faces are red, ( ) for they are handsome. The black man he is ugly, thus his mouth is black, for his face is black. The black man then asked me: 'Where dost thou come from'? I said to the black man: I come from this place'. The black man asked me: 'What is its name'? ( ) I said to the black man: 'My place is the Bitterpits'.

This text strikes me because of its final statement: 'My place is the Bitterpits'. Listening/reading/remembering with a twentieth century European literarily conditioned mind, this one sentence alone is richly connotated with associations of epic qualities: 'The Bitterpits', the 'Breakwater Prison' of then, the 'Robben Island' of today .... that is epic stuff.

I have so far treated these texts quite liberally as narratives; I have also set aside, in the words of Helize van Vuuren (1994:69)

> our neo-romantic obsession with the so-called impurity of the Bleek & Lloyd collection because these texts have been preserved in a fixated form in the written circuit.

Apart from the many questions raised by Helize van Vuuren as to for instance Wilhelm Bleek's skills in transcribing the spoken Bushman dialect and then translating it into English—which by the way he had started to learn in 1848 while studying in Berlin[2]; or the artificiality of the narrative context, to which the Bushmen narrators had to get accustomed—apart from these and related issues within the context of the 'project' of 'reconstruction of the /Xam's oral tradition' (Van Vuuren 1994:62) I would like to focus for a moment on three aspects: the concept of text, the idea of origin and the question of *Erkenntnisinteresse*. The term *Erkenntnisinteresse*—a rather insistently-used term in academic writing in Germany from the late 1960s through the 1970s—is meant to indicate a socially responsible *raison d'être* of the direction of a researcher's project: to what end the research is undertaken and who in the community would be served by the ensuing knowledge: those already in power or those wanting to liberate themselves from ignorance. The context here, of course, was and—within the South African developments of today—might again be, to be aware of political power play. Bleek himself was a keen political observer. His letters from Berlin, written during the revolution of 1848 to his parents in Bonn, show the analytical mind of an actively participating observer (see note 3). Throughout his rather short life, Bleek has repeatedly considered this aspect of *Erkenntnisinteresse*. I am very interested in contextualising this particular aspect from the point of scientific reasoning at the time in Europe where I see at a glance the romantic notion of a collective cultural memory still partially intact in bits and pieces of fairy tales but dying out and rapidly being replaced by a culture of industrial production; then the idea of evolution in nature and the search for origins and sources: the sources of rivers, of peoples and their cultures,

[2] Bleek's letters to his parents, written mainly from Berlin and Frankfurt, c. 1848-1850, U.C.T. Library, The Bleek Collection, sign. C1.1-C1.16.

the origins of language, of history, eventually of mankind. I quote from an article in *The Cape Monthly Magazine* Vol. IX September 1874:129) 'On Inquiries into Australian Aboriginal Folklore':

> I thought it my duty to put aside for a time the, to me, very important work of a comparative Grammar of the South African Languages, and to try to rescue, while it was still possible, something of the language and literature of this dying out nation. The result of these researches, undertaken under the auspices of the Government of this Colony, has exceeded my most sanguine expectations, although we have as yet fathomed only to a small extent the rich mine of Bushman traditional literature.

The second aspect, the idea of origin, needs to be explored. Fresh evidence has just been produced in that respect, as to civilisations that had flourished long before our time and having disappeared virtually without a trace[3]. That in turn points to the direction of a third aspect I want to touch upon briefly: the idea of text. I think we will have to abandon the more traditional ideas about texts as documents, having an originator and a specific format. We also might then have to abandon the more traditional ways of interpreting what then will have been a text in the old format. I am partially and very tentatively pointing toward interdisciplinary research in the field of cognitive science and brain research in particular. To give but one simple example: nerve endings of brain cells in the newly born need constant stimulation to connect and become active. Repetition becomes the very base of our laying the pathways in the neural network for the acquisition of knowledge. The physiological and the intellectual are mutually interlinked. From repetition to mimesis, this shift, this *différance*, might well be the wing of poetry, a rhythmical reaching out and returning, the mythical moving of the spirit upon the face of the waters. Text as a written document would then be a script, notation, musical score, cryptogram. And reading such a text could in fact amount to nothing more than reading out numbers. I want to think in the direction of liberating the text from academic constraints and freeing it so that, in the words of //Kabbo

> [...] that I may ( ) sitting, listen to the stories which yonder come (?), which are stories which come from a distance. [//Kabbo explains that a story is 'like the wind, it comes from a far/off quarter, and we feel it'.] Then, I shall get hold of a story from them, because they (the stories) float out from a distance; while the sun feels ( ) a little warm; while I feel that I must altogether visit; that I may be talking with them, my fellow men (Bleek/Lloyd 1911:301).

[3] I am referring to Graham Hancock, Fingerprints of the Gods. A Quest for the Beginning and the End (1995). Of the few traces left of earlier civilisations, some are presumably kept in mythological tales.

When I realised how very closely W.H.I. Bleek's work is related to the work of Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm in subject matter, in method and in that particular German spirit of the time, which is romantic, anti-authoritarian, quite fiercely democratic and deeply in love with the philological journeys into medieval times and all matters mythological, I began to think it worthwhile to explore those roots, traditions, sentiments, theories of origin and evolution of languages and cultures—but not, and that, I think, could make such a research so interesting, not in the direction of past European History, but to explore an African Culture, strong in its powerful tools of the mind to survive over thousands of years and to assess the changes, the damages, the adaptations and the challenges that have occurred and still have to be faced *vis-à-vis* a culture of different dimensions, strength and power.

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