

# **The Afrikaans Farm Novel and Idealised Sons: C.M. van den Heever's Farm Novels as Narratives of the Nation**

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In this paper I argue that in conservative fictions of nation-building, fictions that are often assumed to make only affirmative use of the particular past they care to remember and construct, there can be found contradictory and more subtly 'progressive' elements. These are sometimes at odds with expectations of an unsophisticated singularity of purpose. As an illustration I examine the work of the Afrikaans writer C.M. van den Heever, placing his farm novels within the larger context of his ideas about the evolution of what he regards as the spirit of the nation ('*Die Afrikaanse gedagte*', or the Afrikaans idea).

I take up some of the issues raised in J.M. Coetzee's discussion of Van den Heever's work in his *White Writing* (1988) (without which my own would not have been possible), but direct my attention differently. Whereas Coetzee reads Van den Heever's novels as fictions of the attainment of a particular kind of consciousness, namely the anti-individual consciousness that allows the farmer to imagine himself part of a collective and timeless husband to the farm owned beyond question, I read these texts as fictions of the '*Bildung*' of individual members of the nation, in a continuous and evolutionary differentiation from the forefathers. Coetzee's reading stresses the tendency in the novels to hagiographise the forefathers and their ways.

I aim to point out how Van den Heever desires to show the new generation of 'Afrikaner' men (and, to some extent, women, as I argue in my paper) the way in which they ought to differ from their predecessors.

## **The farm novel, the past and idealised patriarchy**

With the publication of Coetzee's *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, the South African farm novel was re-evaluated and theoretical interest in the genre reactivated. Coetzee, making use of some of the insights of the critical literature on the German *Bauernroman* (Zimmermann 1975, Schweizer 1976), pays attention to

the ideological content of ostensibly innocent fictions of the land written by white South African writers. Central to his reading of South African (white) pastoral is his view of the farm novel as

essentially conservative ...; it looks back, usually in a spirit of nostalgia, to the calm and stability of the farm, a still point mediate between the wilderness of lawless nature and the wilderness of the new cities; it holds up the time of the forefathers as an exemplary age when the garden of myth became actualised in history (Coetzee 1988:4).

Coetzee's reading of especially the Afrikaans farm novels of the 1930s focuses on the 'retrospective gaze' which locates the ideal of the nation's wholeness in the time of the farming forefathers. In this reading the farm novels pretend to concern a moment "'outside" history' (Coetzee 1988:11); time in these novels is the cyclical time of the farm and the family, of indisputable succession and obedience. The farming family, in Coetzee's reading, functions as a structure that directs all movement and development into the patterns of nature and the seasons, since the individual farmer relinquishes individuality in order to be absorbed into what Coetzee sees as 'a transindividual familial/tribal form of consciousness' (Coetzee 1988:4).

The value of this argument lies in its foregrounding of the ideological underpinnings of white pastoral in South Africa, that is the attempt to provide a 'transcendental justification for ownership of the land' (Coetzee 1988:106). A similar trend towards revealing a concealed ideological desire or programme can be discerned in the critical literature on the German farm novel of the 1920s and 1930s, most notably in the work of Gerhard Schweizer (1976) and Peter Zimmermann (1975).

Coetzee regards as one of the chief ways through which the farm novel achieves its ideological goal (an attempt to naturalise white ownership of the land) the particular way of depicting the forefathers. In the novels, he argues, one sees

efforts to buttress Afrikaner patriarchalism in order that a heightened significance should be attached to the acts of the founding fathers, to maintaining their legacy and perpetuating their values. Thus we find the ancestors hagiographised as men and women of heroic strength, fortitude, and faith, and instituted as the originators of lineages (*Afr. families*). The farms they carved out of the wilds, out of primal, inchoate matter, become the seats to which their lineages are mystically bound ... (Coetzee 1988:83).

Each generation, argues Coetzee, must re-establish its natural right to the farm; the individual farmer needs to learn to see himself as an embodiment of all those who have gone before him, and whose responsibility towards the land he perpetuates. Thus, in Coetzee's reading, the realisation of the self as the 'transitory embodiment of a lineage' is tied to a particular kind of experience of the land that, in Van den Heever's

fiction, is available only to (male) Afrikaners (Coetzee 1988:87). At the heart of Van den Heever's farm novels, Coetzee argues, is the transition from (false and limited) individual consciousness to (true and timeless, because cyclical) lineal consciousness. In this state the farmer sees the meaning of his farm revealed to him, a meaning that is supposedly revealed to each new husband-farmer who proves his worthiness of the name and land of his forefathers.

This reading relies on the fiction of cyclicity built into the family name that is passed on from fathers to sons. Presumably, then, the revelation of the farm as source of meaning and anti-individual identity must be part of the experience of every generation. Van den Heever's work, contrary to the expectations of a genre that characteristically supports conservative political programmes and the maintenance of patriarchally dominated family life, exhibits what seems like a liberalising tendency in this regard. Instead of locating the 'idea of an ordered and happier' time in the past, these novels attempt their critique of the present through a presentation of an imagined future. In many of Van den Heever's farm novels the transformative experience is located in the present generation, which is contrasted favourably with the unconscious and animal-like existence of the forefathers. Van den Heever's texts do not contain simply the contradictions that are the effect of an attempt at ideological blinding. His aim is not to 'cover and to evade' the instability of the period; instead he wishes to exploit and direct the changing fortunes of the nation.

It is to this aspect of Van den Heever's work—my reading of which deviates from Coetzee's—that I now turn.

### The Afrikaans idea

Van den Heever's fictional work of the late 1920s and 1930s, is self-consciously concerned with the creation of the new Afrikaans nation, represented in the novels by farming families, especially by the sons who distinguish themselves from their fathers by being more consciously aware of their relationship with the land. The novels are thus, as Coetzee also suggests, narratives through which *Afrikaner* (male) identity is presented as having its foundation in a mysticised ownership of the land. The consciousness of this new generation of sons differs significantly from that of their forebears, however, who are shown living in a state of unconsciousness. In his reinvention of the 'Afrikaans' farmer and relations within the Afrikaans nation-family, Van den Heever emphasises the evolution, rather than persistence, of the content of the Afrikaans idea.

The transformation that Van den Heever's works are concerned with is, then, not one that occurs for each generation, but one that is part of the experience of a particular group. It follows, too, that this group includes all Afrikaners, and not only

the farmers among them—the farm stands metonymically for land as the farmer stands for the Afrikaner.

### **The family in Van den Heever's farm novels**

In the novels written during the late 1920s and 1930s, Van den Heever develops some of the ideas related to his theory of the Afrikaans idea by means of men who are born into a lineage which owns the land, but who are initially unconscious of their true connection with it. The connectedness to the land is something potentially shared by all the male members of the lineage, but Van den Heever is interested in showing how the new generation is more consciously 'Afrikaans' than their forefathers. Most of his novels deal with the conflict between the generations, yet more than the relationship between father and sons is at stake, since Van den Heever aims to show how the new generation will improve on what has gone before. In many of these novels, set in a time roughly contemporaneous with their composition in the 1920s and 1930s, it is stated that farms have been in the family since the *Trek*—an originary moment seemingly beyond interrogation (Van den Heever 1928:99; 1930:69; 1935:178).

Van den Heever's farm novels undoubtedly serve to legitimate white ownership of the land, and in this sense they share the conservative impulse that characterises the farm novel generally. What is interesting in his work, however, is his concern with improving on the values and ways of the fathers. The nation he wishes to contribute to is one in which blood is valued highly; yet he chooses to do this by developing a new farmer type who is gentler than the stern patriarchs of the past.

With one notable and fairly late (1944) exception, Van den Heever avoids the time of unconsciousness in his narrations. Coetzee has shown that the novels 'display a developing engagement with the problem' of consciousness (Coetzee 1988:88). One reason for Van den Heever's avoidance of the time of the unconscious forefathers is of course the problematics of depicting a consciousness that does not articulate itself. When he does choose to write about the unconscious period in the history of the *volk*, a time when the founding fathers are supposed to have lived in an harmonious relationship with the land, however, Van den Heever is faced with one of the implications of the Afrikaans idea, namely its condonation of aggressively acquisitive claims on the land as basis for Afrikaner national language and spirit. Van den Heever wishes, J.M. Coetzee has suggested, to preserve in his farm novels a putative

organic mode of consciousness belonging to a people who, from toiling generation after generation on the family farm, have divested themselves of individuality and become embodiments of an enduring bloodline stretching into the mythical past (Coetzee 1988:6).

This bloodline connecting the generations is traced through the patriarchal name which fathers bestow on the sons, who must prove themselves worthy of it. Crucial to the propagation of the name and the 'blood' is thus the begetting of sons who can perpetuate the lineage. Likening the farm novel's end to that of the romantic novel of marriage, Coetzee argues that the attainment of lineal consciousness, and the awareness of one's status as husband to the land, is its desired 'consummation' (Coetzee 1988:101). The appropriate end to the farm novel shows the individual farmer's conscious entrance into the line of husband-farmers who have been wedded monogamously to the land of the ancestors (Coetzee 1988:86).

While the forefathers were similarly wedded to the land, Van den Heever shows that they lived unaware of their eroticised bond with the ancestral farm. Many of Van den Heever's novels are concerned with the moment when this relationship is brought to consciousness—the moment, too, of the birth of the Afrikaans national idea. He shows how, in the unconscious (and less Afrikaans) stage of the nation-family's existence, relations within the family, like the relationship between the farmer and his land, remained undervalued because unarticulated. The new generation of farmers he creates are more benevolent rulers over their households and value the ties of blood that bind families together. In this way authority within the household can be legitimated, and through it the right to ownership of the land. The threat to the propagation of lineal consciousness is thus significantly located in the farming family's relations among themselves, and the wider world is relegated to a position of relative unimportance.

In the plots he provides for the previous generations, Van den Heever shows that ties of blood, most often represented in the novels by the love of mothers, were sometimes disrespected. The patriarchs are often concerned with profit, and to this end they exhaust both the land and their kin. In the narrative that ends with the marriage between a farmer and his land, there is no position for women other than as birth-givers to the next generation of sons, who carry the name of the father. Women have to leave the farm of their fathers and take on the name of another farm's bloodline. Here they have to earn their rightful position within the family, but Van den Heever shows some of these women exhausted and ignored as the husband-farmers misguidedly undervalue the organic unit that is the family and its land.

Van den Heever's plots of the attainment of lineal consciousness by the men of farming families, if read as narratives of the growing awareness of these men as members of the familial nation, also seem to be concerned with accommodating mothers and daughters—who are present in their role as carriers of 'blood' rather than power—in the new Afrikaner family-nation. The new generation of Afrikaners will include, and respect the contributions of both men and women; those excluded during the earlier phase of Afrikaner identity, it is suggested, were the women members of the family itself. In a number of his novels, and most significantly in *Laat vrugte*, Van den

Heever presents, critically, the position of mothers in the previous generations. In the eyes of mothers, he writes, one sees

the far melancholy about things that have remained unclear, about an early, passionate adventure, when, far and high, the heart went to pick the pure flower of love (Van den Heever 1939:25)<sup>1</sup>.

The flower metaphor is more explicitly applied to the early dreams of a farm girl in another passage, where the destroying force is identifiable as the unsympathetic farming men of this 'ox-like'<sup>2</sup> generation (Van den Heever 1939:26):

Yes, the years have taught her, they have cut more sharply and restrictively across her life, with heavy, thick-soled boots they have tramped on her existence, they have erased her dreams like foolishnesses, like spiderwebs, merely covering the thoroughway; they have pushed everything away, down, lower, towards the earth. And now she has only her body, her mother's body that has been pulled down by the years, and her dreams lie trampled on the ground like a flower on the ploughed field, where it does not belong, where the practical things, hard deeds, reign alone and the rest is rubbish (Van den Heever 1939:69)<sup>3</sup>.

For this generation of men, all shows of emotion are regarded as 'womanly weakness'<sup>4</sup> to be countered if one wants to retain mastery. The animal-like fathers treat members of their own families as—in a revealing set of nomenclatures—'servant' (Van den Heever 1928:8) and 'slave' (Van den Heever 1939:59)<sup>5</sup>. In *Langs die grootpad* Hansie learns about the purifying value of suffering from his mother (Van den Heever

<sup>1</sup> die verre weemoed oor dinge wat onbegrepe bly, oor 'n vroeë, driftige avontuur, toe die hart ver en hoog die suiwer blom van die liefde gaan pluk het.

<sup>2</sup> beesagtige.

<sup>3</sup> Ja, die jare het haar geleer, dit het skerper en vaster oor haar lewe heen gesny, dit het met swaar, diksoolskoene op haar bestaan getrap, dit het haar drome soos sothede, soos spinnerakke, wat net die deurgang versper, weggevaag; dit het alles weggedruk, ondertoe, af, laer, aarde toe. En nou het sy nog net haar liggaam, haar moederliggaam wat afgebeul is deur die jare, en haar drome lê weggetrap in die grond soos 'n blom op die ploegland, waar dit nie hoort nie, waar die praktiese dinge, harde daade die enigste is en die res bog.

<sup>4</sup> vroulike weekheid.

<sup>5</sup> bediende, slaaf.

1928:51), and marries a woman with the same name as his mother, an indication that not only the patriarchal name and values will be carried on in the next generation. Henning in *Laat vrugte* is said to have the gentle eyes of his mother (Van den Heever 1939:220) and grows up to value her and to sympathise with her sorrow.

The value attached to Afrikaner women as carriers of blood, and the need to include these women in the nation, can be read as a reaction to certain external influences, most notably the opportunities open to young women in the cities. Hofmeyr notes that the city's employment profile favoured the entrance of young women into the labour market. The young women who were sent to the city in order to help support their families not only were in a position to question parental authority, but some ended up marrying non-Afrikaner white men (Hofmeyr 1987:100).

An even greater threat to the maintenance of pure Afrikaner womanhood was that posed by the 'entry of the daughters of the new [Afrikaner] proletariat into the vice market' in Johannesburg (Van Onselen 1982:146). In *Langs die grootpad* a daughter leaves her father's farm after the entrance of an acquisitive stepmother; her ruin and eventual suicide in Durban is emblematic of the destruction of Afrikaner womanhood by the city. Van den Heever's farm novels emphasise the centrality of Afrikaner women (as mothers) to the success of the farming family; this contribution refers metonymically to the role of women as the carriers of the values and 'blood' of the nation. When education for women is advocated in the novels, this is motivated as necessary in order to deserve and assist a husband (Van den Heever 1928:23,143). In *Droogte* a 'feminist' character, and the views she expresses are clearly marked as unacceptable by her anglicised name ('Joey'), her use of English words and the fact that she smokes (Van den Heever 1930:67). In *Groei* the 'feminist' character reads books on the position of women, as well as 'erotic' literature—an association that is intended to show the unworthiness of this un-Afrikaans approach to the woman question (Van den Heever 1933:75).

The farm novel as a narrative through which the Afrikaans nation is imagined as a community of interlocking families in this respect differs little from the way that other nations have invented themselves. Presenting the family as the organic unit within which relations need to be reformulated significantly locates important tensions within the 'nation' itself, rather than between the Afrikaans nation-family and other 'nations' which may lay claim to the land. Writing at a time when authority within the Afrikaner family seemed threatened by the possibility of economic and social independence for urbanised Afrikaner women, Van den Heever is most concerned to include women, and Afrikaner daughters especially, in his reimagined nation. Thus the protagonists of the farm novels characteristically learn to respect ties of blood, a value shown being held by, as well as being represented by, farming women.

The new generation of farmers, conscious of their Afrikaans identity, are often presented as more 'feminine' than the forefathers. Not only do they show respect for the values of mothers, but they are often educated, and hence able to formulate and interpret Afrikaans ideals. The stern patriarchs of the novels are not simply hagiographised for their strength, fortitude and faith (Coetzee 1988:83); they are shown to represent the outdated shape of the Afrikaans idea. One reason for the choice of intellectual men as carriers and interpreters of the values of the nation may well be Van den Heever's concern to legitimate his own position as an intellectual articulating the ideals of the *volk*. The novels also reveal that, for members of the reinvented nation, intellectual abilities will be at least as important as physical strength. Through characters like Hansie in *Langs die grootpad*, who returns to the farm where his predecessors are said to live unconsciously, like plants (Van den Heever 1928:178), Van den Heever develops the possibility of a new ideal of (intellectual) masculinity in contrast with the sometimes destructive patriarchy identified with the previous generations.

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