

The 'grove of death' in Pauline Smith's 'The Miller'

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For some time now critics have been interested in Pauline Smith's use of space and spatialisation. During the 80s in particular this interest was couched in terms of the 'world' of her work: the 'world' she was said to create or construct by writing. Her fiction was read as generated out of the narrative choices she makes, and evaluated (and judged) in terms of the ideology said to underlie and motivate the fictional world thus engendered. J.M. Coetzee's 1981 'Pauline Smith and the Afrikaans Language', Sheila Roberts's 1983 'A Confined World: A Rereading of Pauline Smith', and Dorothy Driver's 1989 'God, Fathers and White South Africans: The World of Pauline Smith' are cases in point.

To a certain extent this critical focus coheres with Smith's own sense of 'writing a world'. In a letter to Frank Swinnerton of 15 February 1936, she remarks:

The narrowness of some of the lives lived in this valley is what Arnold would have called 'fantastic'—yesterday we went up far into the mountains to a most beautiful little farm where they seem never to have heard of any war since the Boer war, and where no papers from the outside world ever reach them—It was as if for those few hours we were living in a little self-contained world safe within a ring of mountains over which no news of disaster could ever travel!

She concludes, 'these are the people I understand best—so there must be something of them in myself' (cited in Driver 1982:125). The 'little self-

contained world' is one with which she aligns herself, as it is one that she seeks to render in her fiction.

Spatial demarcation is one of the ways she does so. So her novel *The Beadle* opens with the nominal co-ordinates that locate its action: Aangenaam hills, Teniquota mountains, Platkops district, Little Karoo, Zwartkops range, Great Karoo, Platkops dorp are listed in order to specify and to delineate the Aangenaam valley. And farm names such as Schoongesicht, Harmonie, La Gratitude, Vergelegen cumulatively register the human significance of landscape.

How we are to read this 'world' is a point of issue. Sarah Christie, Geoff Hutchings and Don MacLennan, for example, admire it:

What remains deeply impressive about *The Beadle* is the integration of setting with theme, so that the story grows organically out of the setting, and the setting is characterised by means of the story (1980:58).

At the same time they insist that,

for the reader, the Aangenaam valley is set in a wider world. First of all, there is the rest of the Little Karoo itself. Beyond the Little Karoo, to the south over the mountains, is the narrow coastal strip with Princetown and the English ... to the north of the Little Karoo is the Great Karoo Beyond Princetown, beyond the Great Karoo, is Europe.

And while the 'purely topographical setting ... merges into what we may call the human setting to the story', we do not read as if we are members of this world because we are in fact positioned as outsiders, by these 'constant subtle reminders of a wider world outside' (1980:60).

Sheila Roberts's experience, by contrast, is one of considerable uneasiness. Her 'rereading' of the novel is a resistant one that registers the 'obstacles' she finds to 'entering and remaining comfortably within the world of *The Beadle*'. The first of these is Smith's

rendering of a conceivably imagined Afrikaans into English; the

second is the way her works contribute towards upholding certain myths about the Afrikaner—myths that have had and are still having important political implications; and the third is the temperamental narrowness of her characters, their tendency towards single, consuming obsessions (1989:99).

It is true that Smith's fiction can be seen to set up a framework of textual enclosure. Yet I have argued elsewhere that for Smith enclosure is an enabling device, engendering a world sufficiently distant and sufficiently separate from her own writing position to make it amenable to scrutiny and interrogation. This is because her fiction is marked by narrative tensions, by disruptions of community codes, and by intermittent unexpectedness that leads to quite radical textual surprise (1997; 1999; 2004/5; 2005). And, as Margaret Lenta has shown, although some of Smith's stories are sentimental, many invite analysis of the relations of power that obtain within this world: patriarchal power, sexual power of men and of women, economic and class power, social and moral power (1998; 2000).

In the short story I wish to consider now, Arthur Ravenscroft finds the same integration of setting and theme as Christie *et al* found in *The Beadle*:

there is the blending of the miller, desperately ill and unhappy, with the solitude of his mill and the mountain scenery as he sits in black self-imposed alienation from those he loves most, while, ironically, hearing their voices when they scramble down to the church service he has refused to attend (1982:44f).

Like the earlier critics' term 'merge', Ravenscroft's 'blending' lacks the precision I will be seeking in this present essay. Yet if we accept it as pointing up the relationship between character and environment we can also recognise it as inviting a reading of the miller with critical distance as well as sympathetic engagement.

Kay McCormick offers a more developed analysis:

In *The Little Karoo* spatial, temporal and psychological distance interact and intersect in interesting ways, ways that reflect the

possibilities of the narrative position(s) chosen for each story.

Spatial distance, she explains,

refers to the distance between reader-as-viewer and that which is seen. In 'The Miller', for instance, the Harmonie church is first seen from such a distance that only its main features are discernible. Shortly afterwards, the distance having been reduced, the reader can 'see' the details of the offerings on the trestle table in front of the church. To use a cinematic analogy, the spatial setting has been given through a long shot followed by a close-up.

In her use of the term, spatial distance does not refer only to the reader's view of things, however. It also refers to

the distance between a character and something in the setting. Attention may be drawn to that kind of distance because of its symbolic overtones, in which case it takes on something of the quality of psychological distance: we see the miller sitting up on the hill looking down at the scene of the Thanksgiving service from which he has alienated himself in his withdrawal from other people (1982:167).

Psychological distance thus exists both between the miller and us readers and between him and the community from whom he sits at a remove.

McCormick's reading of Smith, and of this story in particular, remains a definitive one for me, thirty years on, because it is theoretically illuminating and because it is precise and perceptive. Of the miller, for example, she notes,

Repenting of his self-inflicted isolation from Mintje, he moves down towards the church where she is: he won't go into the church land but wants to call her out to him because it is with her and not with the church community that he wants to be reunited (1982:167).

Her distinction is inconspicuous, but it is crucial; because the miller's relationship with his wife (not with the church) is at the core of the story.

As might be evident from my title my own interest in spatialisation moves on from the paradigm McCormick sets up because it is centred on the grove in which the miller dies. Groves, small woods or other groups of trees, have a long association in human society with spirituality. Alexander Porteous, in *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology*, remarks, lyrically, that,

The popular conception of the character of a grove is an assemblage of beautiful trees which together impart a peculiar beauty to the scene; and the external forms of these trees possess so much beauty, and their overhanging boughs afford so welcome a shelter, that we need not wonder if in early ages groves were considered as fittest temples for the gods, and it was believed by the ancients that ghosts and spirits took a delight in making their appearance there (1928:44).

He cites many examples, from around the world, of groves that host spiritual activities and worship. While conceding that forests have played a major role in the cultural imagination of the West, Robert Pogue Harrison, by contrast, registers their dual, even contradictory nature:

If forests appear in our religions as places of profanity, they also appear as sacred. If they have typically been considered places of lawlessness, they have also provided havens for those who took up the cause of justice and fought the law's corruptions. If they evoke associations of danger and abandon in our minds, they also evoke scenes of enchantment. In other words, in the religions, mythologies, and literatures of the West, the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded. Or where perceptions become promiscuous with one another, disclosing latent dimensions of time and consciousness (1992:ixf).

Such ambivalence is clearly evident in one of the more famous—or notorious—groves in modern literature: the grove of death in Joseph

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹ While not ignoring the numerous instances of groves, even groves of death, that occur in literature generally, I wish to refer to this one in some detail because for me, and I think for many modern readers, it has prototypic status. It thus offers a point of reference in terms of which to consider afresh the world of 'The Miller', and the place of the grove within this world. Newly arrived in the Congo, narrator Marlow strolls into the shade of some trees, and finds he has 'stepped into the circle of some Inferno', where workers for the colonial power have 'withdrawn to die'. The nearby rapids fill 'the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound', an 'uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise'. It is, he remarks, 'as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible'. The men he finds in the grove are scarcely men:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now ... (66).

The ambivalence, the confounding of subjective categories is, I think, quite clear. Yet while the moment is ghoulish, the image surreal, Conrad's method, it must be recognised, is symbolic. His 'grove of death' therefore enables an iconic critique of the inhuman depredations of the colonial power upon Africa, from the point of view of someone outside and above it all, of someone passing through. Later, Marlow looks out from the doorway of the office of the company accountant who works in the presence of a man dying of fever, and sees, 'fifty feet below the doorstep ... the still treetops of the grove of death' (70). As Marlow is just a visitor to the Congo, this experience in the grove enthralls him. And because Conrad's symbolism is fundamental, the contact between man and woods forms a powerful part of the framing context for Marlow's encounter with the 'heart of darkness' that

¹ Conrad, J. [1902] 1967. *Youth, Heart of Darkness and The End of the Tether*. London: Dent. References are to this edition.

is Africa: it confronts him, it arrests him, it forces him to bear subsequent witness.

The core features of Conrad's treatment of the grove of death are that it is rendered in first-person retrospective narrative; that the death it contains is that of others not of the narrating (or focalising) self; that the grove is, to its narrator, alien space in a foreign and hostile place; that the experience in the grove begins the story and does not end it; and that the grove contributes significantly to the ethical matrix in terms of which we read the story.

Smith's treatment of the poplar grove in 'The Miller' is different in many respects. Indeed, at first reading it is surprising that she includes a 'grove of death' in her story at all. Yet a more careful study shows that this grove plays a crucial role in its action, and in the ways in which we read and respond to its central character. The points of comparison that now follow are aimed at briefly teasing out this role.

In the first place, Smith focuses on a single location, a local space in which her characters are settlers, not interlopers or intruders. This space has been domesticated, has become 'Aangenaam valley', unlike the foreign territory to which Marlow has travelled from afar. And the poplars of her grove are exotic not indigenous, not jungle, not even woods. They have been planted, though long enough ago to form an established feature of this settled space.

In the second place, her protagonist is a member of this settled community—though one whose experience of disease and death sets him apart from it. The miller, Andries Lombard, is a 'stupid kindly man whom illness [has] turned into a morose and bitter one'². He is similar in kind to many of Smith's other characters; 'simple, astute, stern, tenacious, obstinate, unsubduable, strongly prejudiced, with the most rigid standards of conduct—from which standards the human nature in them is continually falling away', as Arnold Bennett puts it (1925:10). It is clear at the outset that he is dying, and much of the interest of the story lies in the effects of this on his sense of relationship with those around him: his wife and children whom he torments; the other farmers of the Aangenaam valley whose routine he rejects; his master who, contrary to his calumny, is a just and generous

² Smith, P. 1930 (1925). *The Little Karoo*. London: Cape, page 67. References are to this edition.

man; and, significantly, the Jew-woman, Esther Sokolowsky, who is with him when he dies. In important ways he defines himself against the culture of the valley—though in equally important ways he is defined by nature, as I will go on to show. The ethos in terms of which we read him is activated within this interstice, by this tension.

In the third place, although Smith makes use of free indirect discourse her narrative is in the third person. Thus while the miller's consciousness is foregrounded, he is presented as object as well as subject of the narration; as part of a 'process frame' which registers Smith's grasp of nature and of her characters' relation to it. This is especially evident in her rendition of the grove. Her style is pastoral not symbolic; and unlike the marking of Marlow's entry into the grove of death, the miller's entry into the poplar grove is almost incidental; it happens late in the course of events; and it leads almost serendipitously to his death.

In the fourth place, her story is structurally quite simple. Its action hinges on two significant moments in time, and two significant points in space. Because this is the cultivated environment of an agrarian community, the time for sowing and the time for reaping are well defined. The story opens 'on a cold, clear spring morning' (68), 'in the month of September, when, in the Aangenaam valley, other men planted their lands with sweet potatoes and pumpkins and mealies' (67), and it closes 'in the month of May ... on the Thanksgiving morning [when] the men of the Aangenaam valley brought their gifts of pumpkins and mealies, dried fruit, corn, goats, pigs and poultry', and, '[o]n a long trestle-table in front of the church door the women spread their offerings of baked meats and pastries, their konfijts and waffels and custards and cakes' (71). The temporal cycle in the valley shifts from sowing to reaping, from planting to harvesting, and this cycle shapes the time-frame of the story.

The miller is at odds with this cycle because he is ill and expects to be dead before the harvest. He thus defines himself not in relation, but in opposition to the received practices and temporal patterns of his community. First he refuses to plant. Justifying this to his wife, he says:

I will not plant my lands. If I plant me now my lands surely by the time it comes for me to dig my potatoes and gather me my mealies I shall be dead of this cough that I have from the dust in the mill. And

so surely as I am dead, the day that I am buried they will drive you out of the house in the rocks and to the man that comes after me they will give my potatoes and mealies. So I will not plant my lands. God help you, Mintje, when I am dead and they drive our children and you out in the veld the day that I am buried, but I will not plant my lands for the man that comes after me (67f).

The miller is ill and dying, it is true. Yet in resisting the seasonal imperative by refusing to plant he is also rejecting his role as farmer and as man of the valley, and abjuring his responsibilities as husband and father. His insistent 'I will not' is an assertion of obstinacy, and his repeated 'the man that comes after me' a malediction based both on sexual jealousy and a desire to hurt his wife by referring to the replacement and to the erasure that he anticipates coming at the future moment of his death. Gratuitous this may be, it reveals the strength of his consciousness of mortality, and his inability to perceive any way in which the community will accommodate his death. It is also a masochistic reminder to himself that his life will have had no meaning if his wife and children are, on his death, driven 'out in the veld', out of their settled stable existence into the wilderness. Although his own 'master' is in fact a 'just and generous man', these fears for his family are not ungrounded. In 'Desolation', one of the more brutal explorations of poverty that Smith essays, a seventy-year old widow and her grandson suffer this very fate. After her son's death on the farm on which he has worked for many years, they are summarily and pitilessly ejected into the 'Verlatenheid'—that region of the Karoo that 'takes its name from the desolation which nature displays ... in the grey and volcanic harshness of its kopjes and the scanty vegetation of its veld' (161f). It is just such a prospect that obsesses and torments the miller, that drives him into obstinate and arbitrary reaction.

Thus he also refuses to participate in the Thanksgiving, the annual occasion on which the community celebrates the success of its harvest, observes a sacrament of gratitude:

'Why then should I go?' he cried. 'Is there a thing this day in my lands but the grave that I have dug there? Is it for my grave that you would have me praise the Lord? Go you, then, if you will, and praise him for it, Mintje, but surely I will not' (70).

In opposition to the simple obeisance paid, at this time of year, by those who work the land, the miller couches his relation with God in novel and complex and self-defined ways. The desire to inflict pain on his wife is quite clear, but the logic of his position involves a triadic and hierarchic relation of power that has emerged out of the 'new cunning of his illness'. This is his reasoning: 'If God, who loved him, made the miller suffer, he, who loved Mintje, would make Mintje suffer' (69). It is in the spirit of this power that he drives her from him: 'Timid, humble, down the mountain-side she went, in little quick fluttering runs, to thank the Lord through her tears for His many mercies' (73).

In fact the cycle he is caught up in is a different one. At the start of the story we learned that illness has turned Andries from a 'stupid kindly man' into a 'morose and bitter one' (63). It is a damaging transformation because he takes his illness out on those around him. As this illness advances, he is 'more and more frequently possessed' by 'sudden bursts of fury' (69) that drive his children from him in terror and reduce his wife to tears. Their terror and her tears delight him. Invariably afterwards he is stricken with remorse, and longs to call her back, to 'speak with her of his sorrow and his love' (70). Invariably he resists the urge. Yet now, having driven her away from him on the morning of Thanksgiving, he reflects, 'If Mintje would but turn and call to him: 'Andries! Andries!' he would go to her, and this pain in his chest, this lightness in his head would surely leave him' (72). She does not do so: she doesn't even dare to turn and look back. Thus the cycle of brutality and repentance is not broken.

This leaves him alone in the first of two significant spaces in the story. It is a space that anchors his view of the valley, and offers an occasion for reflection and contemplation. Seated on a plank bench outside his home in front of the mill on the mountainside, he has a vantage point from which to look down over the valley. From this vantage point, as McCormick notes, he sees 'the square whitewashed church, built by Mijnheer van der Merwe for the Aangenaam valley, [standing] at a little distance from the homestead, close to a poplar grove near the Aangenaam river' (71). Although the church is dominant, this first view of the grove serves to place it within the settlement: in proximity to church and river, and at a remove from homestead. This first mention of the grove is then reprised in a more clearly focalised account:

Down in the valley at Harmonie carts and wagons were now being outspanned, and close to the low mud wall of the church-land a fire had been lighted for coffee-making. From his plank seat in front of the mill Andries could see the smoke of this fire rising straight up into the clear blue sky like a burnt-offering to the Lord. In the poplar grove the winter sunshine turned the tall yellowing trees into spires of gold. Through Mevrouw van der Merwe's flower garden, and through the grove, ran the brown bubbling stream which up here in the mountains turned the mill wheel (73).

Overtly symbolic Smith's style may not be, but her use of language is precise and evocative. The passage sets out what the miller sees from his seat in front of his mill, and so, at a factual level, provides visual details of the scene. At a deeper level, it offers his impressions of this scene. This is evident in his analogy, 'like a burnt-offering to the Lord', and his metaphor, 'spires of gold'; both of which indicate the potency of the religious frame of mind that shapes his perceptions. It is also evident in his deictic reference, 'up here', which evokes the 'simultaneous presence and absence' of awareness that Genie Babb ascribes, in a fascinating study of embodiment in narrative, to 'exteroception', and specifically to 'the mechanisms of perception whereby awareness of the sense organ is 'lost' or subsumed in awareness of the object of sensation' (2002:204).

Perhaps because the narrative is focalised through his consciousness, and so registers and tracks his moving awareness of space, there is a preponderance, here, of prepositional phrases: 'in the valley', 'at Harmonie', 'close to the low mud wall', 'of the church-land', 'for coffee-making', 'from his plank seat', 'in front of the mill', 'of this fire', 'into the clear blue sky', 'to the Lord', 'in the poplar grove', 'into spires of gold', 'through Mevrouw van der Merwe's flower garden', 'through the grove', 'in the mountains'. This preponderance delineates, like a tableau, the settled space-time matrix of the world of the valley. Spatially, the world he sees is a contained one: in the present he is seated at a remove from the activities in the valley below; in the future he anticipates with brooding obsession the ejection of his family out of the valley on his death.

Geoffrey Haresnape notes of *The Beadle* that

Smith has another method of giving her characters a definite place in the community. She provides some of them with a physical environment in which they are at home and with which they have more connexions than any of the other people in the novel (1969:71).

I think this method is evident here too. In the miller's case, it is his mill that gives him identity, his home on the mountainside, his lands that he refuses to cultivate, the grave he digs in a corner of them. The prospect of death makes him cling to his 'place': conversely his fear of death is extreme because it will entail losing this place. Nor does the community seem to recognise or register this situation. There is no instance of conversation that suggests a reply to his bitter talk to his wife, his refusal to plant his lands, his boycott of the Thanksgiving, his viciously rhetorical questions. Nor is there much evidence, in the cultural environment of the valley, of provision for his death, besides the presence of the churchyard in which, presumably, rest the bodies of all the community's dead.

This first tableau does not last. Its stasis is disturbed by a principle of dynamism that drives the miller from his vantage point by his home down the mountainside and into the grove, the second significant space in the story. What activates this principle is his recognition of his wife's suffering in the Jew-woman's, and his own role in that suffering. The process is gradual. Immobile as he is, his gaze traces the features of the scene before him, and his mind wanders over the relationships that give it meaning. He recalls the history of the white stone paths round the church, dug out of the mountainside by Mijnheer's sons in vain search of gold, and placed round the church as a tribute by Mijnheer to 'the judgments of the Lord' (71). He hears the voices of his children 'shrill and sweet as they [scramble] like conies among the rocks', but not that of his wife, and suddenly it is 'the one sound in all the world that he wishe[s] to hear' (72). He sees the carts and wagons outspanned at Harmonie for the Thanksgiving he will not join, the fire lit for the making of coffee he will not drink. His eyes follow the route of the 'brown bubbling stream' through the flower garden and through the grove, and relate it to himself, 'up here in the mountains', and to his work, 'turned the mill wheel'. He tracks it to where it joins the Aangenaam river 'close to the little whitewashed store where the old Russian Jew-woman,

Esther Sokolowsky, kept shop with her grandson Elijah'. He reflects that '[e]very year the Jew-woman, who went by no other name in the valley, baked a cake for the Thanksgiving' (73), and recalls that, 'for the first Thanksgiving after she came to Harmonie, [when] old and bent and thin, cringing like a hunted animal, with her thin grey hair tied up in a handkerchief, [she] had come to Mevrouw van der Merwe with a cake on a blue-and-white plate' (74). With this image in his mind, he connects her with his wife, and himself with her persecutors.

In no other human being had Andries ever seen such fear as one saw sometimes in the Jew-woman's eyes And now suddenly, as he sat in front of his mill on this Thanksgiving morning, it was not the Jew-woman's eyes that he saw before him, but his wife, Mintje's, terror-stricken through her tears.

In an agony that was half physical, half mental, the miller rose from his seat. God forgive him, he thought in horror, but if it was the terrible things that had happened to her in her own country that had turned the Jew-woman into a frightened animal, it was he, Andries, who had turned Mintje into a nervous hen God forgive him the evil he had done, but never again would he drive Mintje from him in tears. If he could but reach her now, to speak with her of his sorrow, this pain in his chest, this lightness in his head would surely go and she would be again his little dove, his little gentle fluttering bird, soft and warm against his breast (75f).

This shift from spatial to psychological connection triggers recognition that forces him to see himself anew and spurs him into movement. The shock is sharp enough to unseat him, and the insight, the anagnorisis, powerful enough to draw him after his wife down the mountain to ask her forgiveness. His route takes him into the poplar grove that is close to the church at which the Thanksgiving service is being held. He hopes to call her to him when she comes to the fire by the wall of the church-lands to make coffee. But he is 'weak and shaken by emotion and pain' (76). A 'new, suffocating pressure in his throat' (79) only lessens briefly with his panic at the Jew-woman creeping towards him, but, 'as suddenly as it had lifted the pressure in his ears, in his throat, descended upon him again, and the miller

turned, wild-eyed and suffering, to the old Jewess for help' (80). This moment in the story is important both because it shows him reaching out to another person, and because his inability to speak to her accentuates the link between his wife and her. It also initiates the second tableau of the story, the frozen moment of suspended action that ends with his death.

It is possible to read the story as endorsing a particular relation with the environment that celebrates natural cycles and communal alignment with them, and sanctions the miller for setting himself obdurately at odds with them, unreconciled into the sacramental patterning of work with nature and of celebration of its bounty. Certainly, when he pauses in a clearing of the grove, he looks 'from group to group' and it seems to him that

he alone, in all the valley, was not at the Thanksgiving. He and the Jew-woman, who though she baked a cake for the table, and came every year to look over the wall, remained always, by her faith, an outcast from the gathering (78f).

Such a reading might be strengthened by the location and the manner of his death. When he turns to her for help, the Jew-woman leads him away from the church-wall, and thus away from the group, to draw him down onto a low mound among a little heap of leaves, and to bring him water from the stream. In agony he cries his wife's name, 'But Mintje! Mintje', and she goes to call her. His wife then kneels by his side, draws him up into her arms and responds through her tears, 'Andries! Andries!' (81). But he is unable to speak or to draw her head down on his breast before he slips from her grasp and dies. Although he reaches out for her and she responds to him, the unities he has resisted are affirmed, leaving him to die unreconciled and unredeemed.

Yet so pat a reading of the story is qualified and complicated, I think, in several ways. One of these is the representation of the grove of trees and its role in the action. The grove is given quite specific qualities. The first thing we learn about it is the proximity to it of the 'square whitewashed church', which stands 'at a little distance from the homestead'. This proximity is necessary to the action of the story because the miller's reason for entering the grove is to call to his wife in the churchyard. Yet it also has the effect of locating the grove within a religious frame; a frame that is

strengthened when we see the sunshine turning its trees into 'spires of gold' (73). Secondly, the grove accommodates the 'brown bubbling stream' (73) that is elsewhere in Smith's work called 'the River of Water of Life' ('The Pain', 40). And thirdly, the air in the grove is so 'bitterly cold' that, cut off from the 'brilliant winter sunshine', the miller's body, 'which pain and exertion had thrown into a heavy sweat, grew suddenly chilled' (78).

Given these qualities and given his condition, it is inevitable that moving into the cold dark damp grove will precipitate his death. In this sense, his death is rendered unsentimentally, as a matter of fact; and, in this sense, although the grove is not malevolent it is lethal. True, it offers him support, as he leans against a tree trunk. True it hosts the intervention of the Jew-woman who functions, perhaps, as its agent, its moving spirit. At first reading, her actions are helpful. Responding to his wild-eyed suffering, she leads him 'away from the wall, through the grove, towards her store' (80), and towards the stream. She strips off her apron to wet and press against his throat and chest, her shawl to make a pillow for his head, and the handkerchief that ties up her thin grey hair to bring him water. She also crosses the spatial and social boundary of the church-wall to call his wife to him. Yet her help cannot forestall what is inevitable, and leading him away from his wife, as she does, delays their reunion and prevents him from reaching the redemption he seeks.

The miller opened his eyes and saw above him the little dove, the little gentle fluttering bird to whom his love and sorrow were never now to be spoken. With a vague, weak movement he raised his arm and tried to draw Mintje's head down on to his blood-stained breast. He failed, slipped from her grasp into the rustling yellow leaves, and lay still (81f).

The nature of the grove, together with the offices of the Jew-woman in it, works to bring the miller's life to an end, and it is a bitter ending.

So if the miller defines himself against the natural cycles and the cultural practices of the world of the valley, nature acts back upon him, paradoxically, to define his death. This is a second source of qualification and complication of the pat reading outlined above. I noted earlier that, in contrast to Conrad's 'grove of death', the grove of poplars is a feature of the

settled space of the community. Planted by the community, it reflects an alignment, I think, with the belief that trees, groups of trees, host spiritual presence and are to be valorised because of this. Read thus, we may see the grove as having been established in order to anchor or ground the community, to connect it at a deep level with the trees' spiritual life. Read thus, we may also register more fully why it is the locus of the miller's death.

Although the miller's attachment to his mill and his home is intense, even definitive, the logic of the story requires that he not be left to sit outside his home and look down on the valley and the grove. He does not die there; he moves down into the valley and into the grove to do so. What draws him down the mountainside is his need for forgiveness from his wife and reconciliation with her. It is with her and not with the church community that he wants to be reunited, as McCormick insists. And he enters into the grove because from within it he will be close enough to her to call her to him. This, at least, is his plan, and the desire that directs his movements. Yet, as Harrison points out, the forest is a place where the logic of distinctions goes astray. I outlined above how I think the grove acts to frustrate the miller's purpose. I speculate here, however, that at a subliminal level the miller is drawn by the grove itself: without being aware of it, or knowing why, he seeks entry into the grove and once in it he finds rest. His emotional quest to reach his wife is thwarted, but the deeper spiritual quest to enter the grove and to find the resting place that it offers him is achieved. My speculation is that, like the epiphany that Marlow experienced in the 'grove of death' in *Heart of Darkness*, an ethical relation is released here too in the encounter between man and trees.

In support of this speculation, I wish to consider Smith's repeated use of the word *turn* in the story, since to me this word most intensely reflects the ecological ethos in terms of which we can make sense of—and judge—the death of the miller. The word can of course be either noun or verb. One of the verbal uses noted above occurs in the concatenation, *turn and call*, which projects an action, as does the phrase *turn and look back*, which is used soon after it. After indulging himself in 'sudden bursts of fury' that drive his children and his wife from him in terror and in tears, Andries's heart is 'tormented by a remorseful tenderness for which he could find no expression' (69f). Thus, on the day of Thanksgiving, having driven her away

from him, he realises that Mintje's voice is 'the one sound in all the world that he wished to hear. If Mintje would but *turn and call* to him: 'Andries! Andries!' he would go to her' and, he imagines, his illness would disappear. The shift he longs for is one of both physical direction and emotional orientation, and, of course, she does not make it. She does not even dare to *turn and look back*. The other two verbal uses of the word occur in prepositional phrases that suggest process and movement. First *turned ... into* is a categorical change from one state of being into another. It is used of the miller himself (he 'was a stupid kindly man whom illness had *turned into* a morose and bitter one'), and of the Jew-woman, and of his wife ('God forgive him, he thought in horror, but if it was the terrible things that had happened to her in her own country that had *turned* the Jew-woman *into* a frightened animal, it was he, Andries, who had *turned* Mintje *into* a nervous hen'). In each of these instances, the agency that brings about change is negative, and the change is irreversible, thus locking the story into tragedy. The second prepositional phrase, *turned ... to*, suggests a shift in physical and emotional orientation. When, in the grove, Andries *turns to* the Jew-woman for help, he is both focussing on her and opening himself up to assistance by another person. He is also, through her mediation, able to *turn to* his wife who kneels by his side, draws him up into her arms and responds through her tears, 'Andries! Andries!', belatedly in the way he has longed for earlier (81).

As well as being used of people, the word is used of aspects of nature, specifically the stream and the trees, and with significant effect. If the miller excludes himself from the cultural and religious ethos of the valley, the more important ethos is ecological, and its judgements are very subtle. What triggers the miller's anagnorisis is his visualisation of the Jew-woman, and what leads him to this visualisation is his view from above of the 'pillar of smoke' from the Thanksgiving fire, of the grove of poplars, of the flower garden, and of the stream which runs through them all and in the valley joins the Aangenaam river close to the Jew-woman's 'little white-washed store'. Tracing the course of the stream links him, the Jew-woman and his wife in his imagination. The stream is thus a connective trope amongst the central characters. More importantly, it is both a part of nature and a part of the process of cultivation: 'the brown bubbling stream ... up here in the mountains *turned* the mill wheel'. The subjective cast of the

sentence lends agency—even volition—to the stream: it seems to co-operate of its own will with the work of the wheel. In similar vein, the smoke of the fire built for coffee-making rises 'straight up into the clear blue sky like a burnt-offering to the Lord'. The natural phenomenon, smoke, lends itself emblematically to the religious meaning-making of the awareness focalising it. The last important use of the word is this one: 'in the poplar grove the winter sunshine *turned* the tall yellowing trees *into* spires of gold'. The agent here is sunshine, which, despite the season of cold, has the power to transform tall trees into spires, and yellow into gold. The direction of the transformation is positive, and the object of the transformation receptive, even co-operative with this process working upon it. It thus forms a tacit but powerful backdrop, a tonal contrast, to the miller's resistance to communal practices and to natural cycles.

This said, the ecological ethos also invites positive recognitions. It was tracing the course of the stream that triggered the miller's recognition of the Jew-woman in his wife, of his culpability for her torment. In an image of veiled communion, the water is brought to his lips by her, and it comes from the brown bubbling stream that runs through the different parts of the landscape and connects them all. Prepositionally linked with this stream is the love for his wife that lies deep under the miller's torment: 'through all his blundering cruelty and through the wild and bitter exultation with which her tears and the quick rise and fall of her bosom filled him ran the memory of his old affection for her and the yearning for her love' (69). His love for her is like the stream flowing, unacknowledged, underground, 'at the bottom of all things/Utterly worn out/ utterly clear'³.

In an article entitled, 'A Personality and a Place: Formative Influences on Pauline Smith', Arthur Ravenscroft quotes a letter to her from Arnold Bennett dated 16 February 1923, in which he reacts to his reading of 'The Miller'. Praising it as 'very good indeed', as 'fine', as 'the best thing of yours I've seen', he nevertheless labels it 'a sketch', and offers some trenchant advice:

³ The reference is to Ted Hughes's poem, 'How Water Began to Play', line 21. 1972. *Crow*. London: Faber, page 93.

I have suddenly perceived, comprehended, and understood what is the matter with *all* your stuff from the public point of view. You take for granted throughout a complete knowledge on the part of the reader of the conditions of life in the place and time of which you are writing Damn it, you don't even give it a point on the earth's surface. Who is to guess that it is in South Africa, even? Geographically, sociologically, climatically, ethnologically, ought to be explained & set forth ... (in Driver 1982:44f).

Ravenscroft infers that Smith did take up Bennett's advice: 'for one of the virtues of her art is the fine selection of rich details of setting, which place her characters very sharply and make them appear to belong organically to the South African landscape they inhabit' (1982:44f). I hope the present essay has shown how important I think 'setting' is in 'The Miller', and how her use of space and spatialisation is crucial to her treatment of character.

Yet Ravenscroft's word 'belong' needs interrogation in the case of the miller because Smith registers tension between the centrifugal force of social cohesion and the centripetal thrust of individuation—and she does so through setting, landscape, environment. On the one hand a gap, a space, is inserted between the miller and his world that is key to his characterisation. Whereas the community's occupation of space and time (its 'enclosed world') is relatively unthinking, the miller's desperate need to be in control of his death if not his life impels him into individual choices, decisions and actions. He is alienated from the community in which he lives, and rejects the cycles, the natural rhythms of cultivation that shape its life. The broader consequence is that he is distinguished from its members in coming to read the meaning of his environment in conscious and reflective ways. Indeed, his awareness of, response to, and movement through space, and his sense of his own decidedly mortal location in time are central to what makes him so unique, so tragic a figure. And this figuration is exacerbated by his community's imaginative inability to grasp his experience of dying and of death.

On the other hand, then, environmental dimensions of space and time offer rich resources for an ethical reading of the story. Indeed, I might go so far as to say that the natural ethos can be seen to pass quiet, covert judgements on both character and event. In the first place, it is the miller

who is singled out to enter the grove. He does this alone, and he does this instead of joining the group around the church who, in the 'brilliant sunshine' are 'singing together: 'Praise God, ye servants of the Lord'' (81). In the grove he encounters and is succoured by the non-Christian Jew-woman. He does not reach his wife or even, himself, manage to call her to him: he has to rely on help to do so. His wife does come to join him in the grove. But he fails in his attempt to 'draw her head down on to his blood-stained breast' (82), and so is denied the physical reconciliation he so deeply desires. Initially drawn down by the Jew-woman 'onto a low mound among a little heap of rustling yellow leaves' (80), he struggles to rise and falls back fainting among them (81), and his death, when it comes, takes the form of slipping out of his wife's grasp into the leaves, where he lies still.

His death, when it comes, is a literal enactment of Macbeth's falling 'into the sere/the yellow leaf', and I think Smith's allusion is a nudge to the reader to step back and view this 'little self-contained world' in broader perspective. Haresnape remarks, of a passage in *The Beadle* in which its central character questions the sacrifice of Christ, that Smith

can on occasion completely undercut the dogmatic foundations on which the conservative, Puritan-oriented society of her fiction is erected. She understood that this milieu of stubborn, rigorous faith could give rise to great passions, some of them ugly in their nature and intensity (1983:194).

Whereas before the miller was caught in the grip of a punitive spiritual conundrum ('If God, who loved him, made the miller suffer, he, who loved Mintje, would make Mintje suffer', 69), in the grove he is released from it. Where before he was possessed by fury and an obsessive dread of death, here we see him 'slip' from the thrall of mortality into stillness.

Smith abjures, for this character, the containment, the closure that reconciliation with his wife and his community would supply. By choosing the grove over the churchyard as the site of his death she achieves for him an incorporation, an integration into the ecological ethos of the natural world it represents. This is a pagan choice. Echoing and re-inscribing the gold of the poplar spires in yellow leaves is also a subtle narrative manoeuvre that evades the orthodox religious fellowship of the world of the valley, and

evokes the meditations on mortality of Shakespeare's dark sonnets. In one of several studies of the Navaho, American ethnographer Keith Basso remarks, deprecatingly, 'geographic landscapes are never culturally vacant' (1992:24). In accommodating the complexity of individual experience in tension with the cultural life of the valley, Smith generates a geographic landscape in 'The Miller' that is particularly full, particularly rich. Regional and intimate as it is, it also draws quietly on a broad literary history and imaginative tradition, lifting her grove out of the 'little self-contained world' of her small canvas and showing her prescient willingness to respond to and render an ecological ethos—an ethos that is released in the encounter between human and natural. It also reveals a narrative vision at once compassionate and clear.

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