

Textual Surprise in Pauline Smith's "The Sinner"

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Is there one of us that is without sin? Let him that would listen to the evil that is spoken of another acknowledge first the evil that is within himself, and who then will dare to listen? Who then will dare to speak? (*The Beadle* 171)

A sinner, in an ordinary understanding of the word, is an evildoer or a transgressor, a person who sins without repenting. Throughout Pauline Smith's writing, there is an interest in sin as a concept in the calvinistic world of the Afrikaners she depicts. In his introduction to Smith's first published short story collection, *The Little Karoo*, her critic and mentor Arnold Bennett describes her characters, "the colonists" as,

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, with fantastic, terrific, tragic, or quaintly comic consequences. (10)

As Bennett indicates, these are people who subscribe to a strong moral code, and frequently depart from it, in action if not in conviction. This tension between codes of conduct and compliance with them is a recurrent theme in Smith's fiction, and one that enables her to give life to her fictional world and to offer her readers critical perspectives upon it. It also creates space for surprise: surprise for characters and surprise for readers.

Surprise, in an ordinary understanding of this word, is something sudden or abrupt, a momentary and momentous experience rather than an enduring or developing state of mind. Wonder or marvelling

are the more usual terms for such ongoing conditions or processes. I would argue, though, that surprise is a defining feature of the illumination, the enlightenment, the elucidation, the clarification that occurs in classical tragedy, bringing its hero to an understanding that he previously lacked. The moment of awareness may be sudden, it is true. Yet it is often preceded by subtle indications, suggestions and hints that set up strands of cognitive tension, networks of signs whose meaning can only emerge in a broader pattern. The ground is laid beforehand for resolution into a grasp of the whole, an integral and complete understanding. Perhaps it is stretching a theoretical point to lay claim to a concept such as 'anagnorisis' for a short story by a modern author. Yet the concept is not very far removed from what contemporary psychology refers to as an 'aha' experience, the "reaction accompanying the moment of insight in problem solving situations" (Chaplin 17); or from the moment of recognition that follows and resolves the tension of losing one's words, of tip-of-the-tongue interruptions of memory. In these instances surprise does not come out of the blue, but is prepared for, as it were, at a subconscious or subliminal level. It is almost as if understanding is silently developing all along but only becomes accessible when, for some reason, it is expressed, when it emerges into discursive awareness (Giddens 167).

Given Smith's thematic interest in sin, her choice of title for her story "The Sinner" is not surprising. What is remarkable is the suppleness and subtlety with which her fiction renders the humanity of her characters, these stubbornly insular relics of a rural past. Smith's craftsmanship is one reason I find myself disagreeing with the received reading that her work mythologises—and endorses—an ideology of Afrikaner-as-Israelite (Coetzee). In this story in particular we see a considered mastery of the dynamics of narrative engagement and narrative distance that enables her to play with our reading expectations, to nudge us by successive degrees into a state of surprise, of willingness to accommodate the unexpected and to humour the twisting turning developments and disclosures of her plot. Smith is a consummate craftsman who holds her story in the palm of her hand,

progressively revealing layers of hidden relationship that recast and reconfigure the meaning of its action. To a large extent, this story is about the modulation of knowledge as the narrative progresses: knowing, that is, in tension with thinking, feeling, believing, remembering, hearing, suspecting, hoping. And, in a substantial sense, surprise has to do with knowing and not knowing things about oneself and about others. If one already knows, one can hardly be surprised.

In this essay, I wish to examine a particular feature of Smith's narrative method that is epistemologically loaded: her use of names and naming. A consideration of naming is relevant to the notion of surprise because practices of naming are indicative of the ways in which people respond to and interact with their environment and with each other. By means of naming, people ascribe meanings to other people, to things, to events and processes; rendering them stable and predictable, managing the threats, the uncertainties, the surprises they might otherwise harbour or let loose upon the world. To give a name is to classify, to contain, to control. Because of this, even though names can reflect knowledge of the world, they can also be a substitute for it. In general it is probably true to say that surprise reflects a shift from ignorance to knowledge. Yet when the 'knowledge' one has at the outset is in fact ignorance, is knowledge 'in name only,' then real surprises may ensue that shift what is ambivalent or ambiguous into something clear and certain, something genuine, valid, *bona fide*, something that Afrikaans people would call *aktueel*. And then, often, the taken-for-granted-power of names, too, gives way to more real awareness or insight or understanding.

Although other linguistic habits of Smith's are often quite marked—her use of transfer, for example, mimicking Afrikaans sentence structure in English, or modality that reflects possibilities, probabilities, consequences of actions, choices and decisions—it is especially characteristic that names are important in her work. Since naming always occurs in a cultural and linguistic context, the predominantly Afrikaans community of whom she writes provides her with narrative resources she would not have access to if she were writing only about

English people. In her novel *The Beadle*, for example, she renames topographic features so as to construct a narrative world that is socially and psychologically located and confined. She uses self-ascriptions as well as naming and non-naming by others to trace the emergence or development of identity. She draws on Afrikaans patterns of politeness to indicate relations of power between her characters, and to illuminate the interplay of formality and intimacy in core relationships. I will not here undertake a detailed onomastic study of the story, "The Sinner"; rather will I offer a broad overview in terms of the declarative, ascriptive and relational naming that occurs in it. My primary interest is in the naming of people, but I shall also give some consideration to the naming of places, and the naming of a condition several characters find themselves in: that is, "madness."

The first instance of naming occurs in the title. The "sinner" to whom it purports to refer is a man called Niklaas Dampers. Fifty-six years old, he is "a small, weak, religious man, with pale red-lidded eyes, arms that seemed too long for his body, and a heart that was full of bitterness and the fear of the Lord" (83). His Christian name is one that might align him either with St Nicholas, the holy man, or with Old Nick, the devil. The title of the story, as well as his introduction as first significant character, guides readers to respond to the second rather than the first of these alternatives. So too does the surname he is given. The Afrikaans word *dampers* translates as 'fumes' rising from a pipe being smoked. For a South African reader this is likely to trigger an association with the foremost smoker in our folklore tradition: Jan van Hunks whose smoking contest with the devil produced the 'tablecloth' that hovers perennially over Table Mountain. This association is rapidly reinforced when we learn that Niklaas is a "bijwoner" (a tenant farmer) whose job it is to "plant, weed, cut, dry, strip, dip, and twist" the tobacco of his landlord (86).

The religious frame of the story is first presented in a description of the church attire of the women of the community. It is then applied specifically to Niklaas in the narrative comment that, "for many years this weak, harsh, embittered man had feared the Lord and wor-

shipped Him. For many years he had believed that at the last the Lord would deal justly with such righteousness as his, and visit vengeance upon all such sinners as were most other men in the Platkops district" (85). It is clear from this ascription that at this point Niklaas does not conceive himself as a sinner, and distances himself from those he believes are. It is also clear that his beliefs are rigid, and are vested in a fixed way of seeing himself and others. It is all the more ironic, then, that Niklaas should be targeted for seduction by the stranger Koba Nooi; and that he should be rendered susceptible to her blandishments by a radical loss of faith brought about by the departure of his daughter. The surprise of his susceptibility is both paradoxical and appropriate: it is funny as well as fitting to see so self-righteous a man humbled by his own humanity.

Niklaas's eldest daughter Saartje is his favourite child, and the story begins at the point when she marries and leaves him and her family to live with her husband in another place. Critics of Smith have commented on the significant role of fathers in her work. An intriguing ramification here is the role of the absent daughter. The fact is that Niklaas's love for this child is strong enough to supplant his love for his wife and his other children, and to lead him to feel that God has betrayed and abandoned him.

Niklaas had prayed that Saartje might never leave him, and the Lord's strange answer to his prayer filled his mind with an unreasoning hatred of his ten remaining children and of his wife Toontje, (83)

we learn; and,

no man, it seemed to Niklaas now, could be so merciless to another as God had been to him in taking Saartje to Philip dorp and leaving Toontje in Platkops. If the Lord now, by some miracle, had taken Toontje to Philip and left Saartje in Platkops how gladly would he have praised Him! But God was no longer his friend. (85)

Smith's choice of name for this daughter is unobtrusive; but those familiar with Genesis might remember Sarah as the beautiful wife

whom Abraham passed off as his sister to protect her from the predations of the king in their country of exile. A related blurring of family roles is evident here in Niklaas's devotion to his daughter that is intense enough to border on the incestuous. The fact that this leads to a renunciation of God as his "friend" is a distortion of the moral proprieties that gives weight to the story's labelling him "sinner." It also lays the ground for revelations that occur during the course of the story and at its end, however, which recast the relations of husband and wife, and of father and daughter, in emphatically unexpected ways.

Niklaas's wife's name, Toontje, is a diminutive of Antonia. Although one might translate the Afrikaans word *toon* as 'toe,' the more likely connotation is that of 'tone,' because she is characterised as a "tall, patient, silent woman, who shared with none the secrets of her soul." A *toning*, furthermore, is a 'showing,' a 'making manifest.' As the story progresses, her character gains substance by the surfacing of truths from her past which she has, during their marriage, kept submerged. "God might know what Toontje hid in her heart, but in all their years of poverty together Niklaas had never fathomed it" (83). Her habitual 'tone' of patience and silence has become unendurable to her husband. If he had ever loved his wife, we learn, "he had long ago forgotten it," and "now that Saartje had left him his wife's patience and silence, and his own increasing hatred of her, became a torture which drove the bijwoner to the verge of madness" (84-85). His wife's patience is the more admirable to the reader because Niklaas's antipathy towards her is so intense and seemingly so arbitrary; and because she reacts with compassion and clemency to his subsequent abandonment of her, taking practical and effective measures to protect his name and his position. Ultimately it is her gesture of 'atonement' that makes it possible for him to return to her, and to his place in his home and his community, and to regain the senses he takes leave of when he succumbs to the impetuous desire that fills the space left by loss of faith.

This desire, and the fact that he acts on it, is named in this story (and elsewhere in Smith's writing), as "madness" (84). The form this madness takes, and the first major surprise the story presents its readers, is that of seduction. Niklaas's temptress is one Jacoba Nooi: "a stranger to the district [...] a plump, unmarried woman of forty, with a round childish face, a tongue like a running sluice, and a gentle sing-song voice." She has an "air of great simplicity and innocence" that is belied rather than confirmed by the garb she wears: a gown of "sprigged cotton," and a hat "trimmed with ribbon." The norm for "all other women of her age in the *bijwoning* class" is a plain black dress and a black calico sunbonnet, and her flouting the dress code in this way "makes much talk" amongst them. So, too, does her hand-mirror, which is "rimmed with little shells and set with larger shells at the back" (84), and which she plays with "when her work is done," sitting outdoors and "flashing her mirror in the sun" (85). Such a mirror is an anomaly to the women of the district because they adhere to the strict calvinist code that condemns self-reflection as vanity, and vanity as sinful. She uses this mirror to entice Niklaas to her where she sits by the bank of the river, flashing reflected sunlight up "on to his face, on to his shirt sleeve, on to the bushes and stones that lay between them, and [drawing] him slowly, slowly, down the bank towards her" (88). Such actions by a woman of her age and status are astonishing to Niklaas who, unlike her, really is innocent. An astute reader, though, would pick up the fact that her surname, *Nooi*, in Afrikaans carries the nominal meaning 'girlfriend' or 'sweetheart,' and the verbal meaning to 'invite' or 'entice' or 'beguile.'

The seduction of Niklaas is presented as an outcome of his grief at the loss of his daughter, and his rancour at his wife and God for it: "Niklaas [...] was like a drunken man in his bewilderment. And because his heart was empty now of all sense of righteousness and sin, of all fear of justice and of vengeance, there swept into it a wild tumult of desire that was but another madness" (88-89). It is also presented as an *aporia*, a structural gap. His motivation is treated tacitly, so that we are invited neither to condone nor to engage with it. We receive no

details of the actual event. And this seduction is set off from the next movement of the story by a temporal gap of three weeks, and by the surprising revelations that transpire when his wife goes to visit his employer.

The landowner whom Niklaas serves as *bijwoner* is a "hard master, whose one passion, even now when men said that he was dying, was the tobacco he grew on his various lands throughout the Platkops district. Any *bijwoner* who did not plant, weed, cut, dry, strip, dip, and twist to please him, he dismissed without pity, and all men knew it" (86). He is referred to in the narrative frequently by formal full name, "Andries van Reenen," or by title and surname, "Mijnheer van Reenen," or, when addressed by Niklaas's wife, by title only, "Mijnheer," which emphasises, as does the narrative's term "master," the considerable class difference between them. The name *van Reenen* would translate, loosely, as 'of rain,' and is not, I think, particularly suggestive. What is arresting is the moment of interaction at which terms of address shift from formal deference to intimate parity.

Toontje goes to see him on his farm, which lies "an hour by foot from Platkops dorp," in order to intercede with him on her husband's behalf. When she tells him that Niklaas has abandoned her, his home, his family and his livelihood for Koba Nooi, the following conversation ensues:

"Niklaas? In the Kombuis!" cried his master, incredulous. And he added in a sudden blaze of anger, "May his soul burn in hell and Koba's also."

"Mijnheer," said the *bijwoner's* wife in her quiet level voice, "may God forgive him in his madness, but is it for Mijnheer and me to judge him?"

(90-91)

Initially the narrative focus of this conversation is on Niklaas: it is his location that is remarked on, and the two conversing about him are named in terms of him, as his master and his wife. The old man's incredulity and anger stem in part from his passion for his tobacco and Niklaas's betrayal of his contract in going to work for the Hollander. But Niklaas's incursion into the Kombuis carries a greater symbolic weight than this: it is a trespass that the old man finds pre-

posterous. The reasons for this become clearer in due course. Toontje's characteristic patience and silence are identified again in the tag, "in her quiet level voice," and in the fact that she does not react to the old man's outburst. Added to these qualities of hers here is that of resolve: she meets his judgement, "May his soul burn in hell," with an intercession, "[m]ay God forgive him," and a challenge, "is it for Mijnheer and me to judge him?" Her response is arresting for several reasons: one, that she recasts his judgement as a wish for mercy; two, that she switches from modal, "may," to stative "is"; three, that her question is clearly rhetorical in expecting a negative answer; four, that she questions not only his judgement but also his right and his fitness to make it; and five, that she couples herself with him in this moral inquisition. In doing so, she shifts from direct, second-person address ("Mijnheer") to indirect third-person address ("is it for Mijnheer and me to judge"), in line with the politeness requirements of conversation in Afrikaans.

The old man's reaction is angry and insulting, and does not, at first, register the force of her question. As the conversation proceeds, however, her persistence rekindles his memories of the past, and the connection between them is revealed:

"Fool," thundered the old man, "are you then also mad?"

And Toontje answered: "Mijnheer knows that once I was mad. Mijnheer knows how my madness ended. Did Mijnheer never himself go up to the Kombuis? Or is it that he has perhaps forgotten?"

"Toontje!" cried the old man, his mind moving, slow and bewildered, from his tobacco to the past. "Toontje!"

"Andries!"

For a moment their eyes met, and in that moment the secret which Toontje hid in her heart and Niklaas had never fathomed, lay bared between them.

(91)

Smith prepares carefully for this moment of revelation. For one thing, there is a subtle but definite play of power between them. The old man initially dismisses what Toontje says with a pejorative "Fool," and a hectoring rhetorical question of his own, "are you then also mad?" She responds with quiet assurance, repeating insistently the

phrase, "Mijnheer knows." As well as being an assertion, this is a call on him to bring back into his mind what he knows but has forgotten or suppressed. Similarly, her next two questions are rhetorical but are expressly designed to nudge his memory. The reflexive emphasis of "Did Mijnheer never himself [...]" in particular links his actions in the past with those of Niklaas in the present, and hence insists on the moral equivalence of their conduct. Her continued use of polite indirect address ("he") is then suddenly interrupted when the old man remembers and addresses her for the first time by name. She responds likewise, and this shift in naming marks a moment of intense intimacy. Shortlived as it is, it brings the two into par, and explains why he then responds to her request for help.

This second major surprise of the story works by accretion and accumulation of earlier details whose significance shifts into focus at this point. There have been hints before now of a past connection between the two: "Not for many years had Toontje visited the farm, and not once *since* her marriage had she spoken with her master alone" (89), we are told, and, "In her youth in the Kombuis this tall patient woman, so quiet in her speech, so controlled in all her movements, had been free and beautiful *to him* as a roe-buck in the mountains" (90; my emphasis). It is only in retrospect, though, that the implication of these details becomes clear, when the dramatic shift to intimate address confirms that they have indeed had a relationship, and that the consequences of this relationship have shaped their lives in marked ways. This is clinched by what transpires in the rest of their conversation: in Toontje's question, "Have I not served Mijnheer for more than Niklaas's five-and-twenty years?"; in his wondering reproach, "is this all that you will have of me [...]. You that once lived for me in the Kombuis?" (92); and in his anger at her complicity with her husband's ill-treatment of her:

"And to save your husband Niklaas you ask me this," he cried. "A fool that could leave his tobacco and you for Koba Nooi?"

"Mijnheer! Mijnheer!" answered Toontje, "did I not marry the fool to save the master?"

Again, the old man's mind went slowly back to the past. "God forgive me that and many other things," he said. (92-93)

Here, too, we see Smith's craftsmanship at work. The values of the old man are revealed in his plainspoken insult for Niklaas, "fool," but also in the order of precedence of, respectively, "his tobacco and you." Toontje's agitation is reflected in her emphatic repetition of his title, but her question turns his insult back upon him, binding "the fool" and "the master" implacably together. What emerges is that the marriage of Toontje and Niklaas was a consequence of the relationship between Toontje and Andries, and it is likely that Saartje is her lover's child and not her husband's. This exculpates Niklaas of his evidently incestuous obsession with his daughter, but incriminates Toontje in duping him as well as cuckolding him. It also contextualises Toontje's efforts to protect her husband from the likely consequences of his moral dereliction; because she has done the same for her lover in the past.

The encounter between Toontje and Andries van Reenen concludes when he agrees not only to allow her and her son to process the tobacco crop, but also to say, "that he himself has sent Niklaas up to the Kombuis, to see how the Hollander works his tobacco" (92). This creates a safe space for Niklaas's aberration to play itself out without substantial damage to his name, or to the dignity of his wife and family. Toontje goes to the morning-market to give to a waggoner there a bundle of clothing she has made up for her husband, and to explain his absence "to those that stood by her" (93). The bundle contains a letter she has written him. The letter is marked by the narrative in two ways: firstly by the fact that it takes "great labour" for her to write it; and then by the fact that in the middle of the night she has got up to add "a single sentence." The "labour" arises, we infer, from the emotional load of the communication as well as from the fact that she and her husband are barely literate. The "single sentence" proves crucial, in due course, to the resolution of the relationship between them.

But we do not immediately discover what Toontje writes to her husband because the third movement of the story begins at this point. One of the key aspects of Smith's narrative method is management of time and temporal relations. In important ways the surprises of the text arise from the reactivation of a hidden and forgotten past, which works in unexpected and powerful ways to reconfigure the present. As readers we are by now privy to the core experiences of both husband and wife. We have had the textual surprises; we know everything. But questions remain that are centred on Niklaas: How much knowledge will he get? How will this change him? How can he be reintegrated back into community? The deferral of answers to these questions is, in a sense, a reiteration of Niklaas's ignorance of his wife's past, of the silence and secrets she has maintained about herself. Although Toontje has done all she can to resolve the situation at home, Niklaas does not read her letter for some time, and this delay intensifies his surprise and enhances its redemptive power when he does so.

Another significant aspect of Smith's narrative method is spatialisation, that is the marking of different places and of the movements of characters amongst them. The *Kombuis*, we have seen, carries a strong symbolic significance. We know that Toontje's father was, in the past, a *bijwoner* of van Reenen, "on lands that he once had owned and afterwards sold, in the *Kombuis*," and we know that van Reenen agrees to maintain the deception that he has sent Niklaas up to the valley to learn from the Hollander. The *Kombuis* is designated in the narrative as "that most beautiful and most isolated of all the valleys among the Zwartkop foothills" (93). The name *Kombuis* translates in English as 'kitchen,' and as such represents a gendered space, associated with the preparation of food, and with home and family. Here, in the distant past, van Reenen visited Toontje, and so it is also signified as the site of desire, and the locus of sexual relationship. Set at some distance from the "world" of Platkops (98), it is a private space, a place of retreat from the public sphere. It is associated with Toontje's youth, with her freedom and beauty, with an intact idyll in which she

"once lived for [him]." Thus it carries enduring memories both for her and for van Reenen.

The fact that Niklaas goes "up to the Kombuis" is therefore a narrative reiteration. But the experience he has of the Kombuis is a tawdry business compared to the romantic, elegaic past of Toontje and van Reenen. He lives "in a mud-walled, one-roomed hut with Koba Nooi and [works] for his new master the Hollander" (94). As Niklaas's "madness" subsides he comes to recognise several things: that Koba, "this plump, pleasant, and rather greedy woman, with her gentle chatter and her little giggle, was as secret as his own wife Toontje" (94); that he has been brought to the Kombuis and not escaped to it; that he has been seduced because "in all the Kombuis valley [no man] knew more about Platkops tobacco" than he does (95); that, once his services have been secured, the interest he holds for Koba rapidly wanes; and that his role, now that he is there, is "to please the Hollander" (96). The Hollander is the only figure in the story who is not named, but rather referred to by nationality. He is singled out in other respects as well: he is a foreigner, he is "young and ambitious," he has "built a small factory in the valley," and he works tobacco in ways that are "new and strange to Niklaas." And yet the verb "please" connects the power relations between Niklaas and the Hollander with those between Niklaas and his previous employer, so that if he fails now to "please the Hollander" he is as much at risk of dismissal as he was before.

It is true of this story, and others of Smith's, that women initiate the action and men respond to it. Niklaas was introduced first as a "small, weak, religious man" and we see evidence of these qualities now. Yet the unpleasant surprises he has had bring him greater knowledge of Koba Nooi and of himself, and their effect is evident in the way he names and renames himself. Unlike his wife, Koba is neither patient nor tolerant, and she confronts him with the consequences of his likely eviction with clear-sighted brutality: "If the Hollander says to you 'Go!' where will you go? To your daughter Saartje or your wife Toontje? Say for me now, which will it be?" (96). Filled with "the new

anxiety" which her questions arouse, Niklaas's conscience regains "possession" of his soul, and "he who had once counted himself among the elect now knew himself to be among the damned" (97). He sees himself "for ever a prisoner in the Kombuis, a sinner who had sold himself to Koba Nooi and the Devil" (97). The equation of Koba and the Devil is a counterpoint to the association of his wife and God, and his self-ascription, "prisoner," marks a shift from seeing "most *other* men in the Platkops district" as sinners (my emphasis). He is a "prisoner" in the Kombuis because he has abandoned his previous life and because he assumes his dereliction is public knowledge. Burdened by his sense of his sin, he broods over the likely fate of his wife and children at the hands of his "hard and pitiless old master" who must, he is convinced, have turned them off his lands. "So, he thought, was his sin, and their shame, published to all the world in Platkops dorp" (98). But then one day, "in a drifting, aimless misery of remorse and indecision," Niklaas wanders over to the Hollander's "gay blue wooden house" and sees the Hollander sit beside Koba on the step and put his arm around her. When he sees her press her face against the Hollander's and hold the mirror before them he turns and flees; freed, by what he witnesses, from his position as "Koba's prisoner" (98).

The *denouement* comes when he arrives at the crossroads and is confronted with three choices of direction: north to Philip dorp, where his daughter now lives; south to Platkops, to his wife and family; or east to the Malgas district, which is unknown to him. This spatialisation, too, has symbolic significance. Although in her stories Smith follows the geography of the region, she renames places. The actual town of Oudtshoorn she calls *Platkops*, which translates, literally, as "flat heads" though *kops* is short for *kopjes*, or mesas. *Philip dorp* gives a man's name to Calitzdorp, the place where Niklaas's daughter has gone. More significant, though, is the renaming of Prince Albert as Malgas: "The Malgas district, in the Great Karoo, was dry and waterless, and no tobacco was grown there. All his life he had lived in tobacco lands, but now to Malgas he must go, and live how and where

he could" (100). The prefix *mal* invokes a whole range of negative qualities and conditions—malice, malevolence, *male fides*— as well as the Afrikaans adjective *mal* that translates as 'mad.'

The term "madness" is one Smith uses throughout her fiction, as a label for sexual deviation from the strict moral code adhered to by this calvinist community. Unlike 'sin,' it is a contrastive term that names a transient state. Hence Toontje says of her husband's abandonment of her that "a madness has come upon him"; and responds to van Reenen's vituperative, "Fool [...] are you then also mad?" with the qualifications, "once I was mad," and "my madness ended" (91). Because of this transience, Toontje's interaction with van Reenen in the present is just a reprise—there is no serious possibility that it will bring them back together. Hence she also insists, referring to Niklaas, that "Mijnheer knows such a madness will not last." Transient as it may be, the potential consequences of madness are farreaching, however, as Niklaas recognises when he envisages his family turned off their land, his children adopted "into the homes of others, as the children of poor whites were sometimes adopted, and Toontje herself in the house of strangers" (92).

It is interesting that, although Koba Nooi clearly transgresses the calvinist code, the term "madness" is never applied to her. As Niklaas comes to recognise, her chatter and giggle conceal secrets as deep as his wife's, and her ingenuous flirtatiousness disguises strategic intentions that are Machiavellian in scope. Her dismissal of his concerns is cruel, and so clearcut that he couples her, in his mind, with the Devil. Yet Koba is not deemed mad. It is as if she functions quite outside the moral code of the community, and hence is exempt from its strictures. It is true that she is identified first as a stranger to the district, and her leaving it for the Kombuis without any prospect of return suggests the peripatetic nature of her existence, in sharp contrast to that of Niklaas and his family who are deeply rooted in their place. Indeed, she is neither spatially nor temporally located. Where Niklaas is "burdened *always* by a sense of his sin," Koba Nooi, it seems, is out of time. "No regrets for the past, no fears for the future," we learn, "had *ever* trou-

bled Koba, and she would not, to oblige the weak and repentant Niklaas, allow them to trouble her *now*" (97; my emphasis).

Niklaas, however, is held remorselessly in the grip of time and space. The crossroads at which he finds himself represent a point of despair. Resting by the wayside he contemplates the loss of his home and family, "and through his soul there swept a desolation such as he had never before endured." The "madness" of his desire has by now left him, and the moment is marked by a degree of humility that is registered in biblical terms. The veld around him is gay with flowers, and a bright crimson cluster reminds him of the burning bush "out of which the Lord had once spoken to Moses. But the Lord never now spoke to His people, and who was he, a sinner from the Kombuis, that the Lord should speak to him?" (101). With this last naming of himself, he is rescued from his invidious choice of direction by a slip of paper that flutters out of his bag on to the ground—his wife's letter so painstakingly inscribed. Reading its contents brings to him the final surprise of the story, as he learns of the arrangements she has made, of van Reenen's deception on his behalf, and of her expectation of his return. Since as readers we have witnessed the encounter between her and Andries van Reenen, the content of the letter does not surprise us. A touching detail, though, is her emphasis of his fatherhood, "This I will tell to our daughter Saartje, for surely, Niklaas, when your madness leaves you, you will come again to our children and me" (101).

What is most crucial, though, is the sentence she has added to the letter late in the night: "God forgive me, Niklaas, if I should judge you, for there is not one of us that has not sinned". The effect of this disclosure on him is gradual but profound: "Many, many times did Niklaas read this letter before its meaning became clear to him, and then it was as if in pity and forgiveness God Himself had spoken" (102). His association of Toontje with God has occurred at various points in the story, and here it marks his spiritual reintegration as well as the redemption of their marriage. Her patience reaches him now not as tacit reproach, but as generosity, as *caritas*. It also marks Toontje's renunciation of silence as habitual mode of relating to her

husband: having acknowledged to van Reenen the past relationship between them, she now acknowledges it also to her husband, and in so doing adopts with him the identity of sinner.

The story concludes thus, with Niklaas on his way back to his wife in Platkops dorp, eyes “made redder than ever with tears” (102). This comparative phrase takes us back to the start of the story, which thus serves as a point of reference for the changes that have taken place and the tensions that have been resolved: his “bitterness and fear of the Lord” have been replaced by a sense of God’s “pity and forgiveness”; his hatred of his wife has given way to gratitude and appreciation; where before she was “silent” she now has “spoken”; and the “secrets of her soul” have been revealed.

In several respects the story is a surprising one. In the first place, its characters are successively surprised by the actions of those around them. Niklaas is surprised when God doesn’t do what He is supposed to; when his daughter leaves him; when Koba Nooi seduces him; when he discovers he has been duped into assisting the Hollander; when Koba Nooi betrays him; and when Toontje reveals truths from the past and invites him back. Andries van Reenen is surprised when Toontje defends her husband and calls in credit on his behalf; when she reminds him of their relationship in the past. For the characters surprise is revelation and disclosure of what lies beneath.

In the second place, we as readers are surprised by several unexpected features of the plot: Smith’s objective treatment of God; the pattern of sin and redemption that plays itself out upon a righteous stupid unattractive man, reversing the relation he presumed to exist between “the elect” and “the damned”; this man’s seemingly arbitrary alienation from his wife and his corresponding obsession with his daughter; Koba Nooi’s transgressions of a powerfully conservative moral code; her choice of Niklaas as object of seduction; her entanglement with the Hollander; Toontje’s willingness and ability to cover up her husband’s straying from the community; her confrontation with Andries van Reenen and the revelation of past relationship; her

confession to her husband; and the forgiveness and restitution with which the story ends.

And in the third place, the surprises of the text are cumulative, subliminal. Smith sneaks up on us by inserting echoes and patterns we do not at first notice. The word "flash," for example, is used, unsurprisingly, of Koba's mirror—but also of the old man's anger, which "in a flash" blazes up afresh when Toontje mentions the Hollander's tobacco. The word "bewilder," too, is used of both van Reenen and Niklaas: the old man's mind moves "slow and bewildered, from his tobacco to the past" (91); Niklaas is "like a drunken man in his bewilderment" (88-89) when he sees his face in Koba's mirror; and Koba's talk, in the hut in the Kombuis, is "often now as bewildering to him as was her mirror" (94). Situations are repeated: Toontje's visit to her ex-lover finds him seated on the *stoep*; Koba's seduction of the Hollander proceeds on the steps of his *stoep*. Personal qualities are reinscribed: Koba is as secret as Toontje, and her talk hides as much as does Toontje's silence, even though she is associated with the Devil, not with God. And Smith manages, on occasion, to encapsulate whole insights, whole gestalts of meaning, in a single phrase or sentence, such as, "You that once lived for me in the Kombuis," or, "Did I not marry the fool to save the master?"

Nevertheless, in describing the text as surprising, I would suggest that it is only as surprising as we readers allow it to be. By extension, this has to do with how seriously we take it and its characters. Poor, rural, backward as they may be, their stature and grandeur comes from Smith's treatment of them: her respect for them; the estimation in which she holds them; the "regulated love" that enjoins Arnold Bennett to speak of her "strange, austere, tender, and ruthless talent" (13). Niklaas may be "a small, weak, religious man, with pale reddidded eyes [and] arms that seemed too long for his body," but the grave regard with which he is treated in the story might remind us, if we let it, of Lear's "unaccommodated man," his "poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.105-06). And the role that surprise plays in illuminating, enlightening, elucidating and clarifying the lives of the characters and

the world of *The Little Karoo* is reminiscent of the understanding that comes to the tragic heroes of classical drama. Smith's stance in relation to her characters confers on us readers an ethical responsibility: to be receptive; to recognise ourselves in her creatures; to register the implications of their actions, their relations, their insights for ourselves. And it confers an aesthetic responsibility: to let her word work¹ on us, to receive and respond to its surprises in a state of 'negative capability,' to treat her stories with the seriousness they request. Only through such seriousness can we be sufficiently surprised. Only through such surprise can our own real knowledge grow.

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NOTE

¹The phrase is from John Donne's "The Expiration."

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