

What Oom Gert does not tell: Silences and resonances of C. Louis Leipoldt's "Oom Gert vertel"

Hein Viljoen

Afrikaans en Nederlands PU vir CHO Potchefstroom

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to reconstruct the resonance of "Oom Gert vertel" at the time it was written. The story that Oom Gert tells is reread for its silences and unsaid things. Oom Gert's reticence about his own story, his silence about the politics of the time and his partial view of the devastating effects of martial law are explored against the backdrop of Leipoldt's reports on the trials of Cape rebels in the treason court for the pro-Boer newspaper The South African News and of other reconstructions of the period. From this reading Oom Gert emerges as representing the complexities of the loyalty of Cape Afrikaners. It is postulated that the unsaid historical background, which would have resonated powerfully for Cape Afrikaners of that time, was written out of the poem so that it could fit better into the circumstances of its first publication. Appropriating the poem for Afrikaner nationalism is a misreading.

1. The problem

Recent research into the Anglo-Boer War and especially the way the Boers are portrayed in two recent novels, *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* and *Verliesfontein*, have cast doubt on the image that we have of the Boers as heroic fighters for their freedom. The events of the War are receding further and further into time every day, mocking the idea that we can understand the War as it really happened. By rereading an authentic document of that time, C. Louis Leipoldt's celebrated poem "Oom Gert vertel" (Grové & Harvey 1963: 32-51), it might, however, be possible to push the heavy door of history slightly open.

What I am therefore attempting to do, is to reconstruct some aspects of the historical horizon against which the poem would have been read shortly after the War. In Greenblatt's (1995) terms: I am trying to recapture the resonance of the poem at the time it was written, the hidden voices and social energies that went into its writing. How would a person who has lived through events such as the ones Oom Gert is telling about have understood the poem and how would it differ from our understanding of it 90 years later? Which silences would such a reader have heard or

recognised in the poem? What remained unsaid or was self-evident? (Greenblatt 1990:230). In other words, like the New Historicists, I am trying to understand the past as a complex whole, though in one article I can only touch on a few aspects of that whole. What are the hints Leipoldt gives us of that whole - hints that would have resonated powerfully in the ears of a contemporary?

Nearly a century separates us from the horizon against which a contemporary of Leipoldt read it and from the horizon of discourse and the horizon of social facts and practices of that time. Of course, the reconstruction of such a horizon is an impossible project, since history itself cannot be recovered. What we have left are only documents from that time and reconstructions from these documents to which I can only add a plausible reconstruction of my own. But we can never reach the horizon “wie es gewesen war”. Through the years, however, critics have pointed out a number of problematic sites in “Oom Gert vertel” that could serve as a scaffold for a preliminary reconstruction.

2 A journalistic discursive situation

C. Louis Leipoldt is regarded as a member of the first generation of Afrikaans poets. “Oom Gert vertel” was first published in his first collection of poetry, *Oom Gert vertel en ander gedigte* (1911). Today, his poems seem more “modern” than that of his contemporaries. Critics usually give two reasons for that: he wrote on universal human themes like human suffering, and he used an expressive language close to the spoken language, unlike the literary language of the other two poets of his generation, Totius and Jan F.E. Celliers. The poem itself is regarded as a dramatic monologue in the tradition of Robert Browning in which a single voice relates a particular incident to a (mostly implied) interlocutor, revealing a great deal about himself in this process (see Opperman 1974).

In this instance Oom Gert (1) is telling “the story of our death” (“storie van ons sterfte”) to an interlocutor called Neef Klaas, who also participates in the telling by reading from a photo album, smoking, drinking coffee, and during the emotional climax also taking Oom Gert’s hand.. Oom Gert tells his story in a very roundabout way, interjecting many seemingly unnecessary details. From time to time Oom Gert

also turns to his daughter, Gerrie, asking her to bring coffee, or sending her on errands like chasing the fowls from the stoep when the story might be too painful to her. These instances have a refrain-like quality and serve to demarcate the emotional surges in the poem (Louw 1972: 7-72).

Oom Gert tells his story, it is implied, in reaction to a request by Neef Klaas, who seems to be someone who has heard the facts and is now interviewing a principal witness for the human interest behind the story. At the beginning Oom Gert (perhaps ritually, like speakers in dramatic monologues) disqualifies himself as a narrator. Firstly, he tries to put off Neef Klaas by holding his story up as a moral lesson for young people like Neef Klaas (2):

My boy, what do you think that I can tell you?
You want to hear the story of our death?
All right!
It is never too late to learn
More about that, if you can use the knowledge,
5 Especially for you youngsters. Just hold tight
To what we have, stand on your feet and take
Your part in this our nation.

Here Oom Gert broaches the very important theme of duty. This exhortation will resonate ironically through the rest of the poem, raising the question of what Oom Gert's duty was and how he took his part in the nation. His exhortation does not ring quite true, however. Old men like to lecture younger people, but still this bit of moral sermonising is too heavy-handed. It is as if the voice of the poet is breaking through.

In the lines that follow Oom Gert further disqualifies himself by saying that others can tell the story better and with a "better grasp of all the politics" than himself, who can only tell it from his heart - a heart, moreover, that has been severely traumatised by the War. Oom Gert is deliberately underplaying politics here, as if politics was not important in what happened. Yet when his story gets underway we are told that martial law had been imposed and that the townspeople were uncertain and confused. In other words, Oom Gert is also assuming that Neef Klaas knows why that happened.

This ritual disqualification does not put off Neef Klaas, who apparently accepts that Oom Gert's account will be highly emotional and subjective. Only then does Oom Gert continue his story. It is also clear that Neef Klaas is a relative stranger to Oom Gert:

only after a narrative pact has been struck, is Neef Klaas invited to sit down and have some coffee so that the story can be told. Oom Gert's mentioning of some people that Neef Klaas already knows and others he cannot have known, like Piet Spanspek (see ll. 240-241), also points to the fact that Neef Klaas has only recently come to the town. Yet he knows the main facts of the story (see ll. 175). All this is consistent with Neef Klaas being a journalist interviewing a witness about an important event some time after that event.

The journalistic discursive situation in the poem is important, because it places the reader in a similar position to that of Neef Klaas. Oom Gert can therefore assume that the reader knows the background and the details of the story so that he can be very reticent and even quite silent about important events - as if his heart could not bear talking about them. For example, Oom Gert evades actually telling what happened during the execution by reproving Neef Klaas for taking his hand and "putting him off his stroke" (ll. 304-308). The motives of the young rebels are never explained. We do not even know where the story is set or what Oom Gert did for a living. But is it only Oom Gert's emotionality that lies behind these silences?

Leipoldt's remarks on the poem support the idea that we are dealing with a journalistic discursive situation in the poem. When asked about the origin of the poem in *Die Huisgenoot* (1940) he stated that he wrote the poem in 1901 in response to what an old oom told him shortly after the battle of Labuschagne's Nek (Nienaber 1980: 76). In an autobiographical sketch (see Nienaber 1980: 72) he said that the poem was written at Dordrecht when he was there with the circuit court. This must have been during the time that Leipoldt was special reporter at the Treason Court. From a letter to Lulu Bolus (Leipoldt 1913b) it is probable that Leipoldt wrote and edited the earlier poems during his sea journey to England in 1902, giving shape to what eventually became his first collection (though Leipoldt is notoriously imprecise regarding the dates of his work). Since no manuscript of his first collection survived it is impossible to tell what the extent of this revision was. Judging from the manuscript fragment that Kannemeyer (1999: 330) quotes, this might have been considerable.

3 Leipoldt as special reporter

According to Kannemeyer (1999:ch. IV) Leipoldt became a journalist soon after matriculating in 1898. At first he worked for the pro-Rhodes paper *De Kolonist*, but he was sacked in September 1899 after writing an editorial which was too nationalistic in tone. Soon afterwards he started working for the pro-Boer paper, *The South African News*, where he became friends with John X. Merriman and J.W. Sauer, both of whom were prominent members of the Afrikaner Bond-Schreiner coalition which won the 1898 election in the Cape Colony and both of whom were members of W.P. Schreiner's cabinet. After the first Boer invasion of the Cape Colony the Schreiner administration in November 1899 reluctantly declared martial law in the north eastern districts. Leipoldt was sent to these districts to report on the trails of Cape rebels by the special treason court established by the Indemnity and Special Tribunals Act (the so-called Treason Act) of October 1900. This gave him the opportunity to get first-hand information on the War and the effects of martial law in the Cape. The sittings of the special court started in December 1900 in Colesberg, but were stopped by the second Boer invasion of the Colony. In March 1901 the court sat in Dordrecht and after that in Barkly-East, Cradock, Middelburg, Burgersdorp and Somerset East. The last trials that Leipoldt attended were heard in Kenhardt in November 1901 (Kannemeyer 1999:118).

Kannemeyer (1999:118) also writes that Leipoldt was appointed war correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* in the place of J.A. Hobson who returned to Britain with the outbreak of the War. From that moment on he also started writing for a number of foreign newspapers and journals. This included the Dutch paper *Het nieuws van den dag*, for whom he wrote a monthly series of "Brieven uit de Kaapkolonie" (Letters from the Cape Colony).

In *The South African News* of 12 March 1901 we find the first report (dated March 7) "from our special reporter" on the proceedings of the Treason Court at Dordrecht. The reporter, presumably Leipoldt then, first gives a short description of the town and the circumstances, before virtually giving a verbatim report on the proceedings in the first case heard here - that of Mr. Barend van der Walt. After reporting in detail on 17 cases in total, the special reporter also wrote an account of the sentences given on 18

March (published on 25 March 1901). The scene then shifts to Barkly East. On 3 April “Jottings en route” was published (dated 29 March), containing a complaint on the bad state of the road to Barkly East in a lofty literary style, comparing it to Vondel’s description of the road to hell in his *Lucifer* and Samuel Purchas’s (c. 1575-1626) description of the road to Amara Hill. These literary allusions can be taken as a sign that Leipoldt was indeed this special reporter, but the paper itself is not clear on this, since it usually does not give by-lines.

The last report by the special reporter, on the trial of Mr. P. A. Vorster dated 10 May 1901, was published on 5 June 1901 (p. 4) - well before the paper published brief reports from Reuter’s Special Service on two of the most notorious executions of Cape rebels: that of F.A. Marais and J.P. Coetzee who, together with their comrade Cornelius Claassen, were sentenced to death by a court martial at Dordrecht on 24 June 1901 and executed on 10-7-1901 and 15-7-1901 respectively in their home towns of Cradock and Middelburg (*The South African News (SAN)* 11-7-1901 and 17-7-1901 respectively; Oosthuizen 1994:157-8). They were charged with the murder of English soldiers at Wildefontein during an attack on Commandant Kritzinger’s commando, although the evidence for their part in the action was very slim (Oosthuizen 1994:158). On 12 July and 16 July 1901 the newspaper also published leaders condemning the executions. On 17 July a leader on Coetzee’s execution, as well as a full report on the execution, taken from the *Midland News*, a letter decrying the executions and the official report of the Coetzee trial were published.

There are strong similarities between Marais’s and Coetzee’s executions and the executions described in “Oom Gert vertel”. People from the community were forced to attend the executions in the courtyard of the prison. As in the case of “Oom Gert’s story” these measures were counter productive and induced many people to join the commandos in protest. The executions raised a storm of protest in the whole colony. The Cape ministry sent a strong note of protest to Milner. The public executions and that citizens were forced to attend them were condemned as barbaric in the British Parliament (Snyman 1962:57; Oosthuizen 1994:158; Kannemeyer 1999:126).

These executions were part of the extremely harsh measures imposed by Lord Kitchener after he took over command in December 1900 in his efforts to end the War

quickly. They were designed to deter people from rebelling when Boer commandos invaded the Cape for a second time from December 1900 onwards under able guerrilla commanders like Commandants Kritizinger, Fouche and Smuts (Farwell 1976:327).

Apparently, Leipoldt kept on attending the treason trials, but gradually had to take over as acting editor of *The South African News* after the editor, Albert Cartwright was charged in April 1901 with publishing a treasonable article and jailed for a year. A very youthful Leipoldt managed to edit the paper with the help of very able co-writers like Merriman and Kolbe. After martial law was extended to Cape Town on 9 October 1901, it became impossible to run a pro-Boer paper any longer and the owners of *The South African News* decided to close the paper until the restrictions were lifted. The last issue appeared on 14 October 1901. Publication was only resumed in August 1902 (Kannemeyer 1999:135-140).

The closing of the paper put Leipoldt out of work. He was offered a position in Bulawayo, but decided rather to realise his childhood ambition to study medicine in London (Kannemeyer 1999:150). With money his respected friend, Dr. Harry Bolus lent him, Leipoldt started on a new life, in a sense taking leave of his country of birth and the heated pro and anti-war politics of the time. How heated the politics was is indicated by the fact that the *South African News* was referred to in the loyalist press as “the filthy Church street pro-Boer organ” and “the dirtiest rag of all pro-Boer press” (quoted in Kannemeyer 1999:115). People associated with the paper were even attacked physically. With emotions running as high as that it is somewhat surprising that Oom Gert underplays politics to such an extent.

4 “A better grasp of all the politics”

It is difficult for a present-day reader to understand and evaluate the politics that Oom Gert is underplaying. Lindenberg (1965:64-5) has pointed out that Oom Gert is torn between equally legitimate but conflicting claims to his loyalty: from his family, his “rasgenote” (his people) and his government. As such he represents the dilemma of the Cape Afrikaner during the War. He is tied by blood to his family and to the Boers of the Republics. As a loyal subject his duty lay in obeying the queen and the lawful government of the Cape Colony. At the time the Cape was a self-governing colony

and the administration of William P. Schreiner, Olive Schreiner's brother, was pro-Boer and had actively tried to prevent war by mediating between Kruger and Milner. Oom Gert's Christian respect for the law clashes with his sympathy for the Boers in a war that many regarded as provoked by the British. In these circumstances Oom Gert cannot be totally loyal to any one of these conflicting claims and is guilty before all.

For many Cape citizens the situation was further complicated when different Free State commandos invaded the Colony in November 1899. Commandant Jan Hendrik Olivier, the commandant in chief of the Stormberg area, captured Aliwal-North on 13 November 1899, and, on his own initiative, proclaimed it Free State territory. This proclamation was soon extended to the other (present day) north eastern districts of Burgersdorp, Jamestown, Lady Grey, Barkley East, Rhodes and Dordrecht. Olivier immediately started commandeering all citizens with Afrikaans surnames to join the Free State commandos, using threats or force where necessary. That is perhaps why nearly a third of all convicted Cape rebels, more than 3 000, came from these districts. At the treason trials in Dordrecht the rebels consistently pleaded that they were forced to join, though that might not always have been the case.

The rebels who were tried in Dordrecht were people who gave themselves up and applied for amnesty after the Boers withdrew from the Cape Colony. During the so-called black week of Republican successes the Boers also scored a victory against general Gatacre at the battle of Stormberg Junction (Sunday, 10 December 1899). But after Cronje surrendered at Paardekop on 27 February 1900 and the War turned against the Republics, the Free Staters started withdrawing from the Colony. Battles with the advancing British took place at Dordrecht and at Labuschagne's Nek, a few kilometres outside Dordrecht. At this Nek a force of mainly Cape rebels had to hold their position to protect Olivier's flank. The rebels were poorly led, less disciplined and less well-equipped. The battle (on 3-5 March 1900) ended in a rout of the rebels, but they kept their position long enough to enable Olivier to fall back safely into the Free State (Meintjes 1969:141).

After Labuschagne's Nek many rebels felt that the Free Staters had misused them to protect the Free State border only to abandon them afterwards. Many rebels gave themselves up immediately. In retaliation for the Boer occupation severe measures

were taken under martial law. Nearly all leaders in the Afrikaans community were arrested and kept in prison for up to nine months. The rebels on trial in Dordrecht had been in prison for six months before they were granted bail. The rank and file of the rebels (the so-called class II rebels) were punished by disenfranchising them for five years, but the leaders went on trial and were fined and imprisoned (Oosthuizen 1994:224). At Dordrecht the rebels received sentences ranging from a fine of £150 and a further three months' imprisonment to £350 pounds and a year or 18 months' imprisonment. Button Weakly, who joined the enemy willingly against his own race (as the judge put it) was fined £500, despite claiming that he surrendered under General Brabant's proclamation that granted the rebels amnesty. P.H. De Villiers, who served as lager commandant for the Boers, was fined a £1000 (*SAN 25/3/1901*).

This might not sound much, but it was really a very heavy fine, since stock prices had been pushed down very low by the large numbers of sheep and cattle captured in the southern Free State or confiscated on the farms of rebels who did not give themselves up. Large auctions of 10 000 to 20 000 sheep by the military authorities were common at the time. Oosthuizen (1994:136-7) has calculated that from March until June 1901 the military authorities sold more than 33 000 sheep in the Stormberg area. As part of Kitchener's scorched-earth policy to deny the burgers in the field the support of the women and children on the farms the British in 1901 started destroying and confiscating stock in the southern Free State. Oosthuizen (1994:138) mentions a report in the Aliwal North paper, *The Northern Post*, that in ten days' operations British columns rounded up 64 000 sheep, 1 623 cattle and 2 306 horses. Sheep prices were pushed down to between 5 shillings and £1 each. £1000 is thus the equivalent of 2000 sheep. Oosthuizen (1994:226) has calculated an average conversion factor of £1=R200 from a price of 10 shillings for a sheep, £5 for a horse and a salary of £250 per year for a teacher. This means that £1000 equals R200 000. Many rebels from the Stormberg area were ruined financially by fines like these and by the long times they spent in prison away from their farms. In addition, their property and stock was commandeered, looted or confiscated (Oosthuizen 1994:139). Meintjes (1969:186) mentions that the executions generated great bitterness and writes that the end of the War "held a particular sting for the rebels who were to bear the brunt of retribution for

the cause in which all true Boers believed". J. Ramsay Macdonald wrote that "martial law has been for the Dutch of the Cape what the (concentration) camps have been for the burghers of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony" (quoted in Kannemeyer 1999:123).

By January 1901 nearly the whole of the Cape Colony had been placed under martial law (Spies 1978:172), or "Martjie Louw" as Oom Gert calls it, making the military *de facto* the government of the Cape Colony, and setting aside the rule of law. Military courts replaced the colonial courts, parliament was dissolved, special passes were needed for travel and personal belongings could be confiscated. On 7 October 1901 Leipoldt wrote in *Het Nieuws van den Dag* that people had virtually no rights left in the Colony and that the Supreme Court no longer had any powers over the military. Martial law he called "a system of tyranny and almost Eastern despotism". In the *Manchester Guardian* of 12 February 1901 he asked whether martial law has been designed "to force Dutch colonists into rebellion" since it placed "local politicians in posts where they have at their mercy the persons and property of their Dutch neighbours and political opponents" (Kannemeyer 1999:124). As the measures under martial law were continuously tightened to contain the Boer commandos by confiscating horses, prohibiting the storage of supplies and eventually even ploughing and planting, economic life virtually came to a standstill in some parts (Oosthuizen 1994:130-131).

Despite the first-hand knowledge that Leipoldt had of its devastating effects Oom Gert's description of Martjie Louw is very mild, focusing only on its inconvenience for the townspeople. The devastation caused by martial law and the retribution remained unsaid. Only one line strongly resonates against this background. When Oom Gert tells us the reaction to their pleas of mercy for the captured rebels, he says: "die vuilgoed skreeu om wraak - en hul moet hang" (l. 189). Harvey's literal translation as "the rabble were shrieking for revenge" does not quite have the same resonance of this cry of outrage against the British military authorities, loyalists, jingoes and imperialists. Kannemeyer (1999:125) remarks on this discrepancy in Oom Gert's description of martial law. He is not quite explicit about it, but one can deduce that he attributes this silence in the poem to Leipoldt's sensitivity to criticism from his mentor, Dr. Bolus, on

an article under the title “The Rebel” that was published in the *Monthly Review* of June 1904. Bolus’s letter to Leipoldt has been lost, but from Leipoldt’s reaction it seems as if Bolus questioned the skewed depiction of British acts under martial law in Leipoldt’s article. There are a number of similarities between this article and “Oom Gert vertel”, as Kannemeyer points out (1999:213-5). Leipoldt, in “a pupil’s spirit”, answered Bolus’s criticism in a letter of 13 July 1904 (Leipoldt 1979:42-44). He writes that the article is “to a certain extent imaginative”, but also that it is based on what “a real rebel in Dordrecht prison” told him, implying that there is some factual basis for the atrocities he mentions in the article. Speculating on the rebels’ motives, Leipoldt writes: “... I do not think indignation was a factor in the fate of our S. African rebels. The real motive was family ties, perhaps also a certain undefined sense of wrong done to the Boer states, and therefore of moral injustice” (p. 43). Leipoldt restates the historical fact that several rebels were executed who were “neither ringleaders nor murderers”, especially recalling the case of Coetzee. From Leipoldt’s defence it seems as if Bolus, as loyal British subject, could not quite credit the stories of British atrocities.

It is probable that Leipoldt might have toned down Oom Gert’s view of Martjie Louw to spare Bolus’s feelings, as Kannemeyer argues. It is also probable that Leipoldt, in line with his mentor’s views that “political matters are but phases - art and sciences eternities” as he put it in the letter of 13 July 1904, deliberately underplayed the politics. There is an equally probable third possibility, and that is that the plight of the rebels was overshadowed by the suffering of the women and children in the concentration camps and the glorification of the bittereinders in the field, who became the dominant Boer images. It was thus perhaps no longer possible to speak for the rebels in the time of reconciliation, of forgiving and forgetting, after the War. This is what I will argue in the next section.

Appropriating “Oom Gert vertel” for Afrikaner nationalism

Leipoldt’s first collection of poetry was appropriated for Afrikaner nationalism from the beginning, though a careful reading of its remarkable three-fold opening frame shows that that might have been a misreading. The first poem, “Opdrag” (Leipoldt

1911:V), dedicates the collection to the memory of the children, women and men who suffered and died as heroes. The poems are presented as small and insignificant - little rhymes, fragments, little stars in comparison with their bright example, looking down like big stars now that they are asleep, at peace. In the “Voorrede” (Preface), dated London, October 1911, Leipoldt explains how the book came to be published. Again he presents his work as insignificant: “rijmpjes, versies, gediggies” (small, little poems). He explains that most of the poems were written when he was still in shock from the War and that, for that reason, his feelings might be too strong to appeal to “our people”. Diffidently he suggests that it might be better not to write about the War anymore. But, on the other hand, some of his readers might not forget so easily while nevertheless forgiving (echoing a phrase Afrikaner politicians started using around 1906 as part of the reconciliation after the War). He ends by pleading the reader’s patience and indulgence for his little poems.

Neither of these texts is a strong indictment of the British, nor are they patriotic in tone - they rather seem a bit nostalgic. The dedication is, in fact, situated against a very elaborate description of how the whole of nature goes to sleep at sunset and the moon, rising in early evening, shines on the sleeping heroes in their well-earned rest. The focus falls exclusively on the men who died in battle and on the women and children who suffered and died in the concentration camps.

The third frame is an 18-page introduction by J.J. Smith, the friend who helped Leipoldt prepare the text (and many subsequent editions of Leipoldt’s Afrikaans work) for publication. Smith’s introduction is a learned plea for Afrikaans as a written language parallel to Dutch. He argues that a people (“volk”) are very closely connected to their language and that Afrikaans is the language of the Afrikaans people’s coming of age. Situating the languages against a broad historical background, he argues that Afrikaans and Dutch are equal manifestations of a single Dutch language, sharing a history and a literature. Afrikaans is therefore of equal status to Dutch and equally suitable to be a written language. Right at the end he hails Leipoldt’s poetry as a new proof of an emerging Afrikaans national consciousness and an emerging Afrikaans literature. It is also proof that Afrikaans is the natural vehicle for Afrikaners as it talks to their hearts. He emphasises three characteristics of the

poet: the vital and authentic Afrikaans nature he portrays, the pure melodic Afrikaans he uses and his warm Afrikaans heart (Leipoldt 1911:XXV).

In the second edition (Leipoldt 1917:XXIX) Smith's characterisation of the poet underwent a few significant changes. Nature now takes second place to the soul of the poet he finds in these poems - "the soul of a true poet, full of feeling and imagination, who knows how to interpret ('vertolk') his own suffering and that of his people". The poet's depiction of nature is no longer compared to the simplicity of Medieval songs; rather, nature has become a foil to the poet's own sorrow. Primarily, Smith now regards Leipoldt as a poet who remembers what his people have suffered, calling to mind the war poems. Here, Smith is strongly appropriating Leipoldt's poetry for the Afrikaner volk.

How critics view the character of Oom Gert is a sensitive index of their political positions. In his essay on Leipoldt the prominent Afrikaans critic and literary historian Gerrit Dekker (1934:94) emphasised Leipoldt's passion and regarded Leipoldt's war poetry as "a passionate cry of pain from a wounded soul" ("die felle smartkreet van 'n gewonde siel"), directly and intensely expressing "our war pain" ("ons oorlogsmart", Dekker 1934:94). In "Oom Gert vertel" this pain is made all the more poignant by the way in which Oom Gert is trying to hide his strong emotions in digressions and irrelevant detail. The way he uses "our" here demonstrates the truth of his own cautionary remark (1934:91), viz. that Leipoldt has been misunderstood, because people still expected the poet to be, essentially, a conscious and direct interpreter of their soul. Later, in the revised edition of his literary history during the sixties (s.a.:87), he sees in Oom Gert the language and manners ("trant") of a pure blooded ("ras-egte") Boer. It is not very clear what he means with "ras-egte Boer" but further on (s.a.:88) he does question the assumption that Leipoldt was a nationalistic poet who interpreted the suffering of his people, characterising the poet rather as someone passionately involved with the suffering he witnessed. For Leipoldt he postulates a later development towards a liberal individualism that took him further and further away from that part of the nation to which he belonged.

N.P. van Wyk Louw, renowned poet and spokesperson for the generation of the thirties, wrote that Leipoldt, like no other poet of the period, "gave words to our

suffering” (1972:84) at a time when “ons volk” (our people) were humiliated and devastated. In his essay on Leipoldt’s 60th birthday he wrote that Leipoldt elevated the suffering of the women and children into beauty, objectifying it and making it permanent, and in so doing, freed “ons volk” from the suffering and transformed it into a light for the future (1972:51)(3). By lovingly naming and enumerating typically South African things in his nature poetry, he contends, Leipoldt preserved the Afrikaans world of that period from extinction. With “our”, Louw is indicating the Afrikaner as a people (volk) and it is clear that he closely identifies Afrikaners and the bittereinder population of the former Boer Republics.

Close reading the poem in the sixties Merwe Scholtz (1975, first published in 1961) started wondering what Oom Gert is really telling us and argued that the story of the execution of the two young rebels is the smaller part of the poem and that the story that Oom Gert tells between the lines, in hesitations, in long digressions, in implicatures, is much more complex and interesting. Cardinal episodes in this regard are the episodes of the waistcoat and the horses.

Near the climax of the story, on the morning of the execution, Oom Gert digresses from the story to explain why he had his coat buttoned up:

Yes, I remember well. The day was cool -
You don't forget a day like that so quickly! -
With just a slight east wind - a little cold -
205 For it brought on Nonnie's rheumatic pains -
She always suffered quite a lot from them
And never could bear cold. Well, as I said,
The day was cool and so I had my jacket
Well buttoned up. You know I always liked
210 To have my waistcoat show. What is the point
Of wearing waistcoats if nobody sees them?
However, that day was really fresh,
And so I had my jacket buttoned up.

Why is this fact so important? Surely, on such an important day the narrator should have said more about the circumstances, the people, and their feelings? But this silence is typical of the way in which Oom Gert tells. Between the lines one can read something of the agony of his wife, Nonnie. It is not only the cold and the lack of sleep that caused her pains: we are aware of the intolerable strain she is under and we have already been told that she died the same year from heart disease (ll.138-9). When

Piet Spanspek jokes about the coat, Oom Gert reacts very strongly. But why is the waistcoat then such a big issue for Oom Gert? Is it merely that it was a very solemn day, not a day for jokes or for flaunting your waistcoat? Or is it perhaps that Oom Gert is feeling uncomfortably guilty?

Rather than describing how and why the two young men left town, in another important episode, Oom Gert starts making excuses that he still had two horses standing in his garden. The two young men could not be persuaded to give up their plan to join the Boer commando, but Oom Gert keeps on excusing himself, focusing not on their reactions or motives, but on his feelings and the food he provided for their journey:

145 So Nonnie packed my knapsack full to bursting
 With lots of rusks and biltong. As for me
 I filled the saddlebags with hard-boiled eggs
 And other edibles. For, after all,
 He was my godson, and then Johnnie, too,
150 Was old Saarl's son, and Saarl and I were friends
 So nobody could say I acted wrongly,
 Although, it is true, I was a British subject.
 Could I stand by and see my own flesh suffer
 Whilst I had food? No, I was right, my boy,
155 And conscience since has never bothered me.
 So, in a word, the two were off.

As Scholtz (1975:58-9) points out, Oom Gert's sensitivity about the horses indicates a double sense of guilt. On the one hand he seems to defend himself against the charge that he helped sending the two young men to their death, shifting his guilt to the British for not taking his horses. By pleading that he was loyal to his flesh and blood and to friendship when he gave them food, he is making a pseudo-excuse: the food is not the issue here; the horses and his duty are. On the other hand Oom Gert is excusing himself for his treasonable act as a British subject in helping the rebels - again blaming it on the British colonel for not doing his duty. To Scholtz this sounds "dangerously loyal towards the British government", showing where his sympathies lie.

Oom Gert's strong assertion that his conscience never troubled him, seems doubtful, especially if one notices his inappropriately strong emotional reaction to the young men's wish to do something:

141 'We can't take any more of this, Oom Gert;
 A man must *do* something to aid his nation!
 'Do? Do? Do something! Ach, what can you do?
 Or what can any of us do?

Rather, as emerges from other parts of the poem, Scholtz argues, this inappropriate reaction indicates that Oom Gert felt guilty that he did not also join the commandos. In other words, he did not "take his part in our nation" as he piously urged Neef Klaas to do at the beginning, but left it to two very inexperienced young men. In so doing, he indirectly sent them to their death. His sensitivity about the horses and not displaying his waistcoat are signs of a guilty conscience, in other words. In Scholtz's view Oom Gert therefore is not one of the heroic Boers, but a coward and a weakling who left it to others to do the right thing - that is, to take up arms against the British.

Horses is an extremely resonant word in "Oom Gert vertel" itself and in its context. The young people in the poem are described as balky young horses:

Die jongmense veral was baie steeks -
 Ons kon hul byna nie in toom meer hou nie -
 70 En twee van hulle het sito omgespring.
 The younger ones, especially, were so restive
 That we could hardly keep them all in check,
 70 And, without warning, two of them cut loose.

This image of the young people as balky, spirited horses, suddenly doubling back, is a very apt description of the young people's restlessness and might also indicate that Oom Gert's guilty conscience about the horses is already subconsciously at work here.

In the horses a number of different social energies are concentrated. Legally, under martial law, horses were commandeered, concentrated in safe places and even killed to keep them out of Boer hands (Oosthuizen 1994:156). Socially, that Oom Gert still had two horses in his garden means that he must have been a person of considerable influence, or perhaps that his loyalty was unswerving, otherwise his horses would have been confiscated. Politically, it means that he had had an excellent opportunity to do something himself - had he so wished. Economically, the confiscation of horses led to hardship and bitterness - so that horses can be taken as one of the indices of what the rebels and Cape citizens in general lost under martial law. Strategically, horses were the basis of Boer mobility and therefore of great importance during the War. How

important is indicated by the War Office's estimate that 400 346 horse, mules and donkeys "were expended" in the War (Pakenham 1979:572) - four times the total British casualties. "Horseless", Col. Harry Scobell reported (quoted in Oosthuizen 1994:166), "the Boer is as impotent as a demasted ship". The wrath of the colonel in "Oom Gert vertel" about the horses is therefore quite understandable. Harvey had a fine ear for this resonance when he described the colonel as "buzzing around us like a horsefly", instead of translating "brommer" literally as "bluebottle" or "blowfly" (l. 158).

Kannemeyer (1999:217) takes Dekker and other critics to task for understanding Oom Gert as a pure blooded Boer and not as "the 'loyal Dutchman' he essentially was". Yet he himself falls into the trap of aligning himself with the Boers by describing Oom Gert as "one who himself does nothing in aid of the honourable cause of the republics" ("die eerbare saak van die republieke"). Was it, in his circumstances, really Oom Gert's duty to join the rebels?

In other words, reading "Oom Gert vertel" with "a better grasp of all the politics" and for its silences and unsaid things make it clear that Oom Gert is no coward, but caught up in an impossible situation of irreconcilable duties and loyalties. That explains why the whole idea of doing something seems to disturb him profoundly.

In the final passage of the poem, structurally a kind of coda, Oom Gert displays a subtle shift in his loyalties in his use of the little word "ons" ("us"). He now tells Neef Klaas that Neef Piet and Skeeloog-Louw joined up with "our people" ("hulle by ons mense aangesluit", l. 317). Up to here Oom Gert used "us" for him and his family or the townspeople. When he describes their reaction to the War and to martial law, "our people" refers to the townspeople (ll. 49ff.). The Boer commandos are scrupulously kept at a certain distance by calling them "the Boer commandos" (l. 57) or "Smuts ... with his commando" (l. 125). When he describes the reactions to the capture and execution of the two rebels Oom Gert consistently uses "we" ("ons") for the townspeople or for the circle of his peers. Only right at the end does Oom Gert include the Boer commandos under "our people" ("ons mense"). But on second thoughts, does this really indicate a shift in his loyalties? Or does this merely indicate

that he has taken over the discourse from after the War when Boers and Afrikaner volk became synonymous?

Rewriting history

In his remarks on the poem Leipoldt said that he changed the historical names and places. For the magistrate and the officers in their town he used generic English names like Smith, Jones and Wilson - in marked contrast with the names of historical magistrates at the time, like Hugo (Aliwal-North), Whitham (Dordrecht), Kidwell (Jamestown) or Geddy (Lady Grey) (Oosthuizen 1994:123). The names of the Boer characters are also generic and not historically significant. Very few indicators of time and place occur in the poem, but two might be important: that the magistrate was sent to East London and that the two young men wanted to join Smuts whose commando was rumoured to be encamped at Witkransspruit. The first point might indicate that the poem is set in the Stormberg area, for East London is the nearest port to that region. The second point not only shows that Leipoldt worked away the historical names, times and places, but also most of the historical detail and freely changed the historical chronology for his poem. It also shows that his remarks on the poem are contradictory, since it could not have been shortly after Labuschagne's Nek that he wrote the poem if he wrote it in 1901. The Battle of Labuschagne's Nek took place on 3-5 March 1900, but Smuts passed through the Stormberge and the Cape Midlands only in September and October 1901 (Reitz 1993:215 ff.; Farwell 1976:337ff.). In other words, Leipoldt situated his story of the two young rebels in an unspecified Cape Colony town sometime during the War and amalgamated different phases of the War into one for his purpose. The case of the two rebels can therefore be regarded as representative of the 33 rebels executed during the War. It might also be a hidden reference to the controversial executions of Johannes Lötter and Gideon Scheepers later on in the War (respectively on 12-10-1901 and 17-1-1902, see Farwell 1976:330-332). This, of course, enhanced the tendency of critics to universalise the poem - abetted by a remark from Leipoldt that the poem is not linked to a particular case, but rather represents a young boy's deep indignation at injustice (Nienaber 1980:72-3).

There was ample time to rewrite “Oom Gert vertel” between 1901 and 1911. In fact, Leipoldt “rewrote” the poem a couple of times: firstly in his Dutch and English articles “De rebel” and “The Rebel” and later in the English novel, *Stormwrack*, written in the thirties (Leipoldt 1980). J.J. Smith (1948:96) selected and edited Leipoldt’s first collection “from a stack of loose paper” Leipoldt gave him in 1910. Smith (1948:98-100) indicated that he only changed the spelling and punctuation, Anglicisms and Germanisms and words that would give offence and always worked in close consultation with Leipoldt. But he would have been superhuman if the circumstances of the time did not partly dictate his selection of the poems and the changes he proposed. After all, his decision that the poems should be published was strongly influenced by the struggle to get Afrikaans recognised as a written language and the need for literary works to justify the new language form. Leipoldt himself described Smith as “a very hot Afrikaner” (Leipoldt 1913a).

Conclusion

I contend, therefore, that “Oom Gert vertel” is not only a moving and indirect representation of man’s inhumanity to man and a young man’s strong emotional reaction to it as is generally accepted today. In “Oom Gert vertel” Leipoldt gives us a subtle and moving portrait of a loyal Afrikaans-speaking subject of the Cape Colony who sympathises with the Boer republics. His inner conflicts and divided loyalties would have resonated powerfully for Cape Afrikaners and Cape rebels who suffered under the War and under martial law, physically and financially, but whose suffering was overshadowed by the suffering of women and children in the camps and the heroism of the Boer bittereinders. After the War Boer became synonymous with only these types of the Boer people. The poem was first published just after the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The cry for reconciliation, to forgive and forget, at that time meant that the suffering and divided loyalty of Cape citizens might have been written out of the poem or could only be hinted at or coded into the poem. These unsaid things underline that appropriating the poem for Afrikaner nationalism might be a misreading.

Footnotes

1. *Oom* literally means “uncle” and *neef* “cousin”, but there are no real equivalents to these traditional forms of address in English. Herman Charles Bosman consistently calls his character Oom Schalk Louwrens. *Oom* is used as a term of familiar yet respectful address for an older man and *neef* for an equal or a younger man. *Neef* is now seldom used in this way.
2. The translation is J.D. Harvey’s (Grové & Harvey 1963). He has translated the title as “Oom Gert’s story”, but the Afrikaans title emphasises the act of narrating: “Oom Gert tells”, or “Oom Gert is telling” might be better translations.
3. “..het Leipoldt se gedigte oor die lyding van kind en vrou daardie lyding, ..., tot skoonheid opgehef, geobjektiveer en verduursaam; en daarmee het hy ons volk tegelyk bevry van die blote bot pyn self en die lyding omgesit in liggende krag vir die toekoms”.

Bibliography

- Dekker, G. 1934. Leipoldt as digter. In: *Causerie en kritiek*. Pretoria : J.L. van Schaik. pp. 90-119.
- Dekker, G. s.a. *Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis*. Kaapstad : Nasou. 12th printing.
- Farwell, B. 1976. *The Great Anglo-Boer War*. New York, etc. : Harper & Row.
- Greenblatt, S.J. 1990. Culture. In: Lentricchia, F. & McLaughlin, T. eds. 1990. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. pp. 225-232.
- Greenblatt, S. J. 1995. Resonantie en verwondering. *Yang*, 31(2): 22-35.
- Grové, A.P. and Harvey, C.J.D. eds. 1963. *Afrikaans poems with English translations*. Cape Town London New York : Oxford University Press. 2nd printing.
- Kannemeyer, J.C. 1999. *Leipoldt; ‘n Lewensverhaal*. Kaapstad : Tafelberg.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1901. Brieven uit de Kaap. *Het Nieuws van den dag*, 7-10-1901, p. 17. Typescript copy in the M.P.O. Burgers collection, National Film Archives.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1911. *Oom Gert vertel en ander gedigte*. Kaapstad/ Pretoria Johannesburg : / Holl.-Afr. Uitg.-Mij. / J.H. de Bussy.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1913a. Letter from London to Dr. F.V. Engelenburg, dated 14 February 1913. Unpublished. M.P.O. Burgers collection, National Film Archives.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1913b. Letter from London to Mrs Lulu Bolus, dated 1 May 1913. Unpublished. M.P.O. Burgers collection, National Film Archives.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1917. *Oom Gert vertel en ander gedigte*. Pretoria, Johannesburg en Amsterdam / Kaapstad : J.H. de Bussy/ Holl.-Afr. Uitg.-Mij. 2nd printing.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1940. Oor my eie werk. *Die Huisgenoot* dl. XXVI no. 976. 6-12-1940. p. 15 e.v. (Also in Nienaber 1980.)

- Leipoldt, C.L. 1979. *Dear Dr. Bolus*. Letters from Clanwilliam, London, New York & Europe ... Edited with an introduction, notes and index by E.M. Sandler. Cape Town : Balkema.
- Leipoldt, C.L. 1980. *Stormwrack*. Edited and with an afterword by Stephen Gray. Cape Town : David Philip.
- Lindenberg, E. 1965. Oom Gert in die gedrang. In: *Onsydige toets*. Kaapstad en Pretoria : Academica. pp. 63-67.
- Louw, N.P. van Wyk. 1972. *Opstelle oor ons ouer digters*. Kaapstad en Pretoria : Human & Rousseau.
- Meintjes, J. 1969. *Stormberg: a lost opportunity*. Cape Town : Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Nienaber, P.J. 1948. *C. Louis Leipoldt, Eensame veelsydige*. Johannesburg : Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel.
- Nienaber, P. J. 1980. *Leipoldt in beeld en woord*. (Revised edition of *Leipoldt, eensame veelsydige* by P.J. Nienaber for the centenary of Leipoldt's birthday on 28 December 1980). Johannesburg : Perskor.
- Oosthuizen, A.V. 1994. *Rebelle van die Stormberge; Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902*. (A regional history of the Anglo-Boer War in the north eastern Cape.) Pretoria : J.P. van der Walt.
- Opperman, D.J. 1974. Die aard van die dramatiese alleenspraak In: *Naaldekokker*. Kaapstad : Tafelberg. pp. 118-132.
- Pakenham, T. 1979. *The Boer War*. Johannesburg / London : Jonathan Ball / Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Reitz, D. 1993. *Commando; A Boer journal of the Boer War*. Halfway House : Southern Book Publishers. 1st South African ed., 2nd impression.
- Scholtz, M. 1975. Wat vertel "Oom Gert vertel?" In: *Herout van die Afrikaanse poësie en ander opstelle*. Kaapstad : Tafelberg. pp. 53-63 (originally published in *Standpunte*, Feb. 1961).
- Smith, J.J. 1948. Chris Louis Leipoldt - my vriendskap en "samerwerking" met hom. In: Nienaber, P.J. ed. 1948. *C. Louis Leipoldt, eensame veelsydige*. Johannesburg : Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel. pp. 94-108.
- Snyman, J.H. 1962. Rebelle-verhoor in Kaapland gedurende die Tweede-Vryheidsoorlog met spesiale verwysing na die militêre howe (1899-1902). *Argief-jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*. 25ste jg.
- THE SOUTH AFRICAN NEWS, 1900-1901* (microfilm, the State Library, Pretoria).
- Spies, S.B. 1978. *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900 - May 1902*. Cape Town Pretoria : Human & Rousseau. 2nd impression.