

# Reading water in *The Little Karoo*



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Bordered by the Swartberg mountain range to the north and the Cape Fold Mountains to the south, the semi-desert region and its people inspired Pauline Smith's eponymous collection of stories, *The Little Karoo* (1925). Earlier critics have argued that, in Smith's stories, the region's geographical boundaries (as well as her use of Afrikaans-inflected language) 'confine' and 'restrict' the world of its characters. Informed by the precepts of ecocriticism, this paper provides a fresh take on Smith's stories of the Karoo, close to a century after their first publication. Our intention is to 'read for water' after Isabel Hoffman, Sarah Nuttall and Charne Lavery, as the motility of the streams and rivers that flow in and through this arid landscape challenges the fixity and enclosure the earlier critics read into her work. Drawing on Hubert Zapf's conception of literature as 'cultural ecology', we are interested in the 'energetic processes' of water in the stories, and the 'ecological space' in which it makes its impact. Rather than reading water as being at the behest of humans, we seek to recognise the valency it is given in the stories, and in this light to explore the impacts of its presence, its actions, and its absence.

**Contribution:** This article adds to the emerging field of ecocriticism in South Africa by exploring the literary valency given to water in Pauline Smith's stories of the Karoo.

**Keywords:** Pauline Smith; Little Karoo; water; ecocriticism; literary valency.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.

Shovel them under and let me work—

I am the grass; I cover all.

So begins Carl Sandburg's poem, 'Grass', which, published in 1918, commemorates the processes of nature responding to the human ruins of war. Of course, grass cannot 'speak'. To take up the poem in its own terms, readers must enter into a fictional contract with the poet that enables it to do so. We remain aware that the 'person' speaking is the mediated voice of the poet; yet his text works by inviting us to consider the work of the grass that overlays and ultimately obliterates the violent traces of war. By contrast, Langston Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' retains for its speaker a human voice, identified by his African ancestry and by his witnessing Lincoln's liberation of American slaves. 'I've known rivers', he says (Hughes 1921):

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (p. 71)

Here is no attempt to speak *for* water, but rather a brooding similitude set up between the speaker and the 'ancient dusky rivers' he evokes. Published in 1921, 3 years after Sandburg's 'Grass', the poem shares with it imagery drawn from nature that insists on an intrinsic interrelatedness with human experience. In a more recent poem, Ted Hughes (1970:93) too eschews first-person, while focalising 'How water began to play'. The form the poem takes is repetitive. The assertions 'water wanted to live', 'it went to' and 'it came weeping back' recur multiple times. On its ventures, water meets 'the sun'; 'the trees', which 'burn' and 'rot'; and 'the flowers', which 'crumple'. When it goes to 'the womb' it meets 'blood', 'knife', 'maggot and rotteness'. Then it wants to die. Having been 'to time ... through the stone door'; after searching 'through all space for nothingness', it wants to die. Finally it has 'no weeping left', and lies 'at the bottom of all things / utterly worn out utterly clear'.

Hughes's representation relates to what scientists call the water cycle: 'The interdependence and continuous movement of all forms of water provide the basis for the concept of the *hydrological cycle*', say Ward and Robinson (1990:3) in their *Principles of Hydrology*. The major processes which make up the cycle are evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. Not all precipitation reaches the ground. What does, follows three courses: remaining on the surface

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as pools and puddles; flowing over the surface into streams and lakes; seeping through the surface to join the underlying groundwater. This model, they acknowledge, is a simplified and generalised one because the 'smooth, uninterrupted, sequential movement of water is belied by the complexity of natural events' (Ward & Robinson 1990:4) – and because human modifications may be made to any of the components of the system (Ward & Robinson 1990:5). Unlike the scientists' neutral, objective terms, Hughes's poem presents water's experiences emotionally. It wants to play; it weeps; it ends up worn out. What the texts have in common is a sense of the energetic processes of water, and, perhaps, of its resting place 'at the bottom of all things'.

Certainly, water is fundamental to all living things. Science writer Ghose (2015) explains:

All life on Earth uses a membrane that separates the organism from its environment. To stay alive, the organism takes in important materials for making energy, while shuttling out toxic substances such as waste products. (n.p.)

Because water is a liquid at temperatures on Earth and because it is a 'universal solvent' it can efficiently transfer substances between cells and cells' environments (Ghose 2015). In the Anthropocene, 'fundamental to all life' has come to mean 'fundamental to human life' and therefore water is widely seen as a basic human right. It has also come to mean that water is understood instrumentally: useful for drinking, for cleansing, for cultivation, for spiritual practice. And in many works of literature it is presented symbolically: as standing for or representing qualities of interest to writers and readers.

Increasingly, views are emerging that counter these lines of thinking. In a position piece in *Archaeological Dialogues*, cultural anthropologist Strang (2014) argues that because water is material, it has agency:

Every human interaction with material things', she asserts, 'entails ... considerations of its [sic] agentic capacities: what is this material/object? What are its properties? How does it act? What can/will it do?' (n.p.)

Water, she says (Strang 2014):

[H]as a multiplicity of effects upon people and environments, ranging from immediate molecular interactions in organisms; to carving out watercourses, depositing silt etc. in river valleys; to making vast hydrological movements and transformations at an atmospheric level. (p. 141)

Its epistemological agency is likewise vast, its (Strang 2014):

[C]ore meanings as a life-generating, life-connecting source; as the basis of wealth, health and power; as a transformative medium; and as a metaphorical base for concepts of movement and flow, recur so reliably in different cultural and historical contexts that there is little choice but to conclude that its material properties are relationally formative. (p. 140)

While Mukerji (2021) acknowledges that water's 'physical properties can be made to serve human communities' she notes how it also 'flows and floods, evading capture and overcoming boundaries by flowing over and around them; or it can collect in low-lying areas, be tapped with wells, or disappear into the sand'. And therefore, she calls it a 'trickster, defying or eluding human control' (Mukerji 2021:23). Like Strang, Klaver (2021:64) argues for 'another way of taking water seriously: a relational way'. She follows Linton in identifying 'modern water' as denuded of its 'ecological, cultural, social, and political dimensions and relations' and draws on Yazzie and Baldy's notion of 'radical relationality' that 'brings together the multiple strands of materiality, kinship, corporeality, affect, land/body connection, and multidimensional connectivity' (Klaver 2021:65).

Relationality is a key feature of the ecocritical collection Devine and Grewe-Volpp put together in 2008, under the rubric *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations*. The contributions to their volume demonstrate, in their words:

[T]he imbrication of nature and culture, or, more specifically, how water as an autonomous, active force affects human culture, and how, on the other hand, cultural ideologies and processes try to tame, to instrumentalize and to define a natural element albeit often with disastrous results. (pp. 4–5)

The same title was taken up in the 11th Literature and Ecology Colloquium in South Africa in 2014 (Literature & Ecology Colloquium). The call for papers invited explorations of the relationship between words and our inland waters – because 'South Africa's water situation is dire, with over-use and extensive pollution now exacerbated by climate change'. Five years later, the 2019 Colloquium again took water as its theme, exploring 'relationships between humanity and nature, with a particular focus on water as an element crucial to the lives of all living things' and 'prominent in ecocritical literature' (Amazwi South African Museum of Literature). South Africa is a 'water-scarce country', with our situation worsened by 'social-ecological factors such as the demands of agriculture and energy generation, failing and limited infrastructure, and overpopulation' – to which more recently should be added failures in our sewerage systems. This theme of water resounded with our own burgeoning interest in literature and the environment, and triggered reconsiderations of earlier readings of the stories of Pauline Smith which had already recognised the importance of water in the lives of their characters.

Prominent at the 2019 Colloquium were presentations by the Wits research group Oceanic Humanities for the Global South. Subsequently, members of this group (Hofmeyr, Nuttall & Lavery) published a special issue of the journal *Interventions*, entitled *Reading for Water*, which they introduced as 'an experiment ... a method that follows the sensory, political and agentic power of water across literary texts' (Hofmeyr et al. 2022:303). Prompted by the 'felt reality of ongoing water crises in Southern Africa', their orientation is

steeped in theory: including 'critical oceanic studies, new materialisms, coastal and hydrocritical approaches, hydrocolonialism, black hydro-poetics, and atmospheric methods' (Hofmeyr et al. 2022:304). Ours is not. Yet their introduction offers useful formulations: that 'reading for water' is a 'portable method' applicable to a wide range of texts (Hofmeyr et al. 2022:fn2, 305); that water can be 'an inspirited and spiritual substance' (Hofmeyr et al. 2022:313); that 'letting water(s) into our analyses' entails adopting 'spiritual and mythic alongside immersive and material methods of reading for water' (Hofmeyr et al. 2022:312, 313).

Their recognition of immersion recalls Wylie's conception of 'infiltration'. Acknowledging Nuttall's term 'entanglement' as a 'powerful metaphor' he feels 'infiltration' better expresses the 'subtle diffusions of influences between formerly separated entities, places, levels and cultures' and 'suggests a way of reading better suited to the operations of infinitely fluid and changing ecosystems' (Wylie 2011:354). Although the liquid associations of Wylie's term are apt for this present essay, our interest is in the narrative choices that confer agency on water; and to capture this propose rather the notion of 'literary valency'. Deriving from chemistry, in theory which explains the combining capacity of atoms, the concept has been used in other fields, and especially linguistics, to include the 'complementation patterns', and the phrases and clauses that typically follow a verb (for detailed discussion of these concepts cf. Allerton 1982:2; Quirk et al 1985:65; Herbst et al 2004:2; and Carter & McCarthy 2006:504). Rather than reading water as definitively agentic, or as symbolic, we seek to recognise its 'combining capacity' and thus to explore the impacts of its presence, its actions, and its absence within Smith's stories.

Aside from 'Desolation', Smith sets all her stories in the Little Karoo, which Bennett describes, in his Introduction to the 1925 collection (the same edition used for all further citations), as:

[A] plain (with everywhere prospects of magnificent mountain ranges) upon which are cultivated vines, tobacco, grain, and especially ostriches, but only in rare patches – where water can be persuaded out of the earth. (p. 7–8)

In a rather pejorative study of Smith's novel *The Beadle*, Roberts (1982:232) argues that Smith's fiction 'confines' both the world of the characters and our reading of it. Gardiner too notes the importance of geography in all of Smith's writing. 'The most obvious point,' he says, 'is the degree to which the characters are restricted by major physical barriers like the mountains, the semi-desert and the vast distances' (Gardiner 1983:44). Although our earlier readings of her work interrogated this 'confinement' and this 'restriction' (Hooper 1999, 2001, 2008), we must concede that this bounded setting renders characters vulnerable to the austerities of their environment, and, particularly, to the presence and the absence of water. At the same time, the motility of the streams and rivers that flow in and through this landscape challenges the fixity and enclosure the earlier critics read into her work.

Her characters' vulnerability stems in part from the fact that most of them are involved in farming, for which water is a vital resource. Cultivation is, as stated above, just one of four principal uses of water, which include cleansing, quenching of thirst, and spiritual practice. Given that the water of the region is brackish, Bennett (1925:7–8) notes, the inhabitants of the Little Karoo have to depend, for drinking water, on rain 'hoarded in tanks'. Although 'happily there is rain, and happily the rainwater will keep sweet for six months', Bennett's diction is significant. The 'hoarded' water, for example, is not uncomplicatedly 'sweet'. A marked contrast is drawn in 'The Pain' between the tank water the old couple are given in the town and the 'brown bubbling mountain stream' from which they drink at home. Bennett (1925:10) goes on to point out that the inhabitants of the Little Karoo are 'very religious and very dogmatically so'. The spiritual significance of water is strongly registered in 'The Pain' and in other stories as well: the deaths involved in gaining access to it in 'The Sisters' associate it with blood; and the water brought to the dying man in 'The Miller' has distinctly sacramental overtones. Notably, none of the stories features rain, although snow causes the flood that drowns Jan Boetje in the 'The Schoolmaster'. Also notably, it is the absence of water that exerts a pernicious influence on the lives of characters in both 'The Sisters' and 'Desolation'.

Literature, according to Zapf (2008:852–853), transforms 'logocentric structures into energetic processes', and opens up 'the logical space of linear conceptual thought into the "ecological space" of nonlinear complex feedback'. Recognising both the geographic and climatic features that characterise the region, and the 'ecological processes and natural energy cycles' with which human culture is 'interdependent', and by which it is 'transfused' (Zapf 2016:79), our purpose now is to 'read for water' in Smith's *Little Karoo*.

While the presence of water in 'The Sinner' is the least obvious among the stories we will consider, it is evident in its traces: in the riverbank on which newcomer Koba Nooi perpetually sits before seducing the bijwoner Niklaas Dampers (and in the pun of his surname); in the seashells which adorn the mirror she flashes at their faces; in her worldly knowledge of the ships at Zandtbaai which distinguishes her from the in-dwellers of the valley. It is alluded to in the name of the landowner Andries van Reenen ('of rain'), and in the bladder stone which is killing him by preventing him from 'passing water'. Perhaps the most curious trace it leaves is in Koba's 'tongue ... like a running sluice' (Smith 1925:84), with its suggestions of control and direction as well as flow. Her sing-song voice, together with the mirror she deploys, characterises her seduction of Niklaas as an intentional recruitment for the young 'Hollander' (p. 90) to help his tobacco-growing up in the Kombuis. Lastly, water feeds the lush tobacco lands 'down by the river' (p. 100), to which Niklaas at the crossroads decides to return, rather than go to his daughter Saartje in the 'dry and waterless' Malgas district (p. 100). Perhaps it is the 'dewy

night' that is awaited for the tobacco leaves to be stripped when they are neither brittle nor prone to mildew (pp. 91–92) that best represents the quiet presence of water in harmonious balance with the people who depend upon it in order to farm tobacco effectively.

Water in 'The Sisters' is, by contrast, predominant, as a source of bitter conflict and destruction, manifesting deadly 'political and agentive power'. The opening paragraph of the story presents the riparian rights that both frustrate and drive Burgert de Jager in his quest to cultivate his farm of Zeekoegatt. Despite the water-furrow he has built from the Ghamka River to his lands, these rights belong to his neighbour, Jan Redlinghuis, and the two cannot agree on a fair distribution. This results in numerous 'water-cases', which de Jager repeatedly loses, bringing 'bitterness and sorrow' (p. 151) to his whole family, and leading, consequently, to the death of his wife who has a disease of the heart. To pay for his water-cases, in a moment of madness, de Jager bonds his lands to this same neighbour (p. 152). When he is unable to repay the bond, Redlinghuis offers to take his daughter instead (p. 152). Marta agrees to the marriage, and so both she and the water are commodified, as Redlinghuis and Sukey, the younger sister who narrates the story, recognise when they use the term 'sold' to characterise the exchange.

Smith's use of modality in this story is significant: it explores, interrogates and exposes ethical matrices and dynamics of power (see Hooper 2005:133). Strikingly, in the 'offer' Redlinghuis makes, and repeatedly in conversation with Sukey after this, he uses the definite 'will' as an assertion of power:

[I]t is your sister Marta that I will marry and no one else. If not, I will take the lands of Zeekoegatt as is my right, and I will make your father bankrupt. (p. 155)

After this conversation, Sukey adopts the same modal, as does her father at the end of the story. By contrast with these assertions of will, water shifts from commodity into something that needs persuasion or enticement: Sukey and her father both speak of 'leading' the water to the lands. More tentative is the use of the little verb 'let'. Marta says to Sukey: 'If I marry old Jan Redlinghuis he will let the water into my father's furrow, and the lands of Zeekoegatt will be saved' (p. 153). Later, her father asks, rhetorically: 'Is it not wonderful, Sukey, what we have done with the water that old Jan Redlinghuis lets pass to my furrow?' (p. 156). This small word reflects a mindset of allowing or enabling; of acting in harmony with the natural direction or inclination of water. By contrast, 'leading' the water triggers a bloody transubstantiation. Conscious of her sister's suffering, Sukey rebukes her father: 'What is now wonderful? It is blood that we lead on our lands to water them' (p. 156). After Marta's death and Redlinghuis's suicide, her father concurs: 'It is blood that I have led on my lands to water them, and this night will I close the furrow that I built from the Ghamka River. God forgive me, I will do it' (p. 160). The valency of the

water in this story is thus far from simple: the father's obsessive determination to get water at all costs taints it as something that brings life to his crops but death to the people he sacrifices in pursuit of it.

Water is more directly lethal in two of the stories, and ambivalently so in a third. A drift of the Ghamka River features twice in 'The Schoolmaster'. On the first occasion, the narrator Engela goes with Jan Boetje and the children he is teaching to the Rooikranz drift on the river. Engela is in love with him, and he has started to respond, and so the occasion offers the chance of closeness and intimacy. But the events that occur at the drift put paid to this. As Wilhelm (1977:65) has noted, Smith repeatedly uses the word 'but' – often linked with 'little' or 'small' – to indicate the scantiness of water or vegetation in the region. Here, we learn, 'There had been but little rain and snow in the mountains that winter, and in the wide bed of the river there was then but one small stream' (p. 55). This contrast is emphasised by the scale as well as the colours of the scene. The banks of the river are 'steep', and bounded by the 'great red rocks' which 'give the drift its name'. The air is 'still' and 'clear', the sky 'blue', and, to Engela, 'how beautiful against the rocks were the white wings of the wild-geese' (pp. 55–56). Having crossed the stream, the mules refuse to move. Jan Boetje stands up in the cart and 'slashes' at them but they back away from him, 'towards the stream' (p. 56). In a fugue of fury and frustration, he jumps down and first beats and then stabs their eyes. Blinded, the mules blunder downstream, 'with the cart bumping and splintering behind them, and Jan Boetje after them' (p. 57). Engela sends for her grandfather who follows the mules and shoots them. For a long time after that, Engela recalls, 'the splinters of the cart lay scattered down the bed of the river' (p. 58). The drift's peace and beauty are destroyed: inscribed on it instead are the remnants of the arbitrary violence and destruction that occurred there.

In penance, Jan Boetje acquires a 'heavy clumsy' hand-cart to drag through the veld to support himself as a smous and leaves the farm (p. 59). Engela sends her little Bible after him, with a promise to wait for him as long as she lives, and takes over as teacher. The following winter, snowfall on the mountains brings the river down in flood. Her grandfather takes the children to the drift to see it, but Engela sits looking out of the half-door of the schoolroom, seeing rather 'far above the orange grove, the peaks of the Zwartkops mountains so pure and white against the blue sky' (p. 64). The colour contrasts reprise the earlier scene at the drift, and she feels that Jan Boetje has 'at last found peace' and is on his way to tell her so. Instead, her grandmother comes to her, with the little Bible she sent after him 'damp and swollen'. Jan Boetje has drowned; his body found down the river, 'his harness still across his chest, the pole of his cart still in his hand' (p. 64). The 'small stream' that hosted his momentary mad violence is now a river in full flow, and brings its own retribution: the human power he perpetrated upon the mules answered by the natural power of the river in flood.

In 'The Pastor's Daughter', the old father of Niccoline Johanna dies after being pushed into the Lourens River by the drunken Jan Steen. From 'his struggle with Jan' and 'his wetting in the stream' he develops a fever, and dies 3 days later (p. 130). His death has significant and ironic repercussions for his daughter, who is freed from the promise she made to her mother to care for him. Although her mother dies soon after her husband, Niccoline's lover Paul Marais has by then found another wife, and so the pastor's death by water inflects the tone of the story, like that of 'The Schoolmaster', as one of lost opportunity and emotional loss. Niccoline remains unmarried for the rest of her life, her identity foreclosed as 'pastor's daughter'. Besides its lethal power in this story, water features briefly when her mother dies. During the night, she has spoken fluently and at length about Niccoline's release from her filial obligations, and the opportunity she believes Niccoline now has to marry Paul. Dying, she asks for water, which her daughter brings her. Miss Cherry is sitting with them and props her up, and Niccoline holds the 'little glass' to her lips (p. 131), but her mother does not drink. Niccoline recalls: 'The water ran out of her mouth and down her chin and on to her breast, and I saw that my mother was dead' (p. 131). The flow of the water reveals her passive corporeality: in death she has become the bodily ground over which the water runs.

The word 'run' is significant in 'The Miller' too, although it is not the flow of water over the miller's body but its application to it that marks his death. Andries Lombard is 'a stupid kindly man whom illness had turned into a morose and bitter one' (p. 67). Dying of tuberculosis, he blames God for his illness and takes his fury and frustration out on his wife and children. Underlying his 'blundering cruelty' and the 'wild and bitter exultation' he feels at her piteous response, however, 'ran the memory of his old affection for her and the yearning for her love' (p. 69). The water metaphor is subtle, but it is echoed and emphasised when the word 'ran' recurs shortly after. As the miller has not planted, and has nothing to offer, he refuses to join his wife and children for Thanksgiving. McCormick (1983:166) points out how 'long shot' shifts to 'close-up' as he looks down from his seat in front of the mill on the mountainside, and traces the millstream as it 'ran ... through Mevrouw van der Merwe's flower garden and through the poplar grove to where it joined the Aangenaam River close to the store of the old Russian Jew-woman, Esther Sokolowsky' (p. 73). The stream connects the 'places' of these characters, and, in Andries's mind, the persecution Esther has endured in her home country with the suffering he has inflicted on his wife. And so he follows her. Once in the grove, he is overtaken by emotion and pain and collapses against a tree. Esther finds him, and goes back and forth to the stream to wet her apron and press it against his throat and chest; to soak her handkerchief and hold it to his lips. Feverish as he is the 'icy cold water' brings him 'an agony that at last gave him speech' (p. 81) and he calls his wife's name. When she comes he is unable to speak his love and sorrow, and unable to 'draw her head down on to his blood-stained breast'. Instead, he slips

from his wife's grasp, and lies still (p. 82). The effect of the water brought to him is thus ambivalent. Intended to relieve and revive him, it enables him, briefly, to break through the 'humming in his ears' and the 'suffocating pressure in his throat' (p. 79), and to call out. But unlike the water Niccoline brings, which runs over her mother's body and shows she is dead, this water chills him so as to precipitate his death, unredeemed, in the arms of his wife.

In all three stories, death thus occurs as a result of exposure to water; in the schoolmaster's case through drowning by the river in flood; in the pastor's case, through sudden and arbitrary immersion; in the miller's, through application to his face and body. In each instance, the death by water is narratively apt, though the role of water is more and less active.

In 'The Miller', however, water plays both an agentic and a spiritual role. It is mentioned first as 'the brown bubbling stream' which 'up ... in the mountains turned the mill-wheel' (p. 73). The stream takes its colour from the fynbos through which it runs, and its bubbling is indicative of irregularities in the riverbed. Therefore, its introduction is factual. But the recurrent use of the word 'turned' in the story is significant (Hooper 2008:331). Here, the subjective structure of the sentence in which it first appears lends agency and volition to the stream. Its 'turning' the mill-wheel suggests active co-operation in the process of milling, in a relation between nature and people that, like the dew in 'The Sinner', is harmonious, in accord. The water brought to the miller by Esther Sokolowsky has no such agency, yet there is a sacramental quality to her actions, and to the water she brings. Neither she nor the miller participates in the Thanksgiving ceremony because both are excluded from the religious community holding it. But it was tracing the flow of the stream that led him to follow his wife, and thus imbibing water from it is a communion of its own kind: an engagement with the spiritual connections he saw the stream make; an emanation of the natural 'stream' of affection and love that underlies, and countermands, the torment he both suffers and inflicts. Unlike the pastor's wife, he is alive when water is brought to him and, unlike her, he is able to drink the water of the stream thus 'inspired'.

The spiritual qualities of water are most strongly registered in 'The Pain', which sees an old couple, Juriaan and Deltje, travel from their home on the mountainside to the hospital in Platkops dorp to seek treatment for Deltje's mysterious 'pain'. As Wilhelm (1977) points out, in this story the:

[M]eagre language of the spirit comes from the Aangenaam Valley, where the mountain water tastes fresh; the language of the body and its healers is that of the stone hospital in the rational, 'flatheaded' town of Platkops. (p. 69)

Gardiner (1983) too recognises these spiritual qualities of water in his 'Clear Brown Water: A Study of Pauline Smith's "The Pain"'. In 'Undercurrent Dialogue: Free Indirect Discourse' in Pauline Smith's "The Pain" (1992), Cosser

reads the story as pastoral parable, and sees the role of water as epitomising the distaste the old couple develop for the town values they encounter in the hospital at Platkops. The contrast between the material tank-water and the spiritual stream, he says, is echoed in the spiritual pain which supersedes Deltje's physical pain while displaced from her home (Cosser 1992:93). In 'The Religious Element in *The Little Karoo* and *The Beadle*' Ridge (1983) pinpoints the biblical allusions that link Juriaan's sense of a God withdrawn to Psalms, and Deltje's water imagery to Chronicles and to Revelations. The spiritual significance of water in 'The Pain' is unarguable. Yet the 'readings of water' offered by Gardiner, Cosser and Ridge concentrate, selectively, on its symbolism, on its role in Deltje's spiritual crisis. Because we are interested in water in its own right, we rather consider all the references to it that occur in the story: in the 'ecological space' in which it occurs; in the impacts of its presence and its actions.

The first mention of water comes after the description of the couple's 'mud-walled' home on the mountainside, which is 'close to a small stream behind a row of peach-trees' (p. 17). Its proximity – and potability – make this water immediately and consistently available to them. Although 'small', the stream is reliable: it waters the peach trees so that 'every year' the couple can take dried fruit to the Thanksgiving ceremony, and 'every morning' Deltje sprinkles its 'clear water' on the earthen floor of the living room before sweeping (p. 17). We learn later that the 'little stream [has] never once in fifty years' failed them (p. 35). While the soil of their lands is 'poor and thin' (p. 15), the stream enables them to keep oxen and goats and hens, and to grow pumpkins, tobacco, mealies and peas as well as peaches. When Juriaan packs up the ox-cart for their journey to Platkops, it is water from the stream that fills their small water cask. Thus, the quiet presence of this water in their daily lives is accepted unquestioningly – until they are separated from it.

Unlike the mountain stream, the Ghamka River they encounter in Platkops is barren and featureless. The gardens and lands of the houses slope down towards its east bank, and the hospital is the only building on its west bank: stark and new, with no trees, no garden, and no green lands around it (p. 26). When they arrive, the old couple 'cross the river by the nearest drift' (p. 27), and when they leave they return 'through the drift' (p. 44). The river thus functions to demarcate the landscape and to separate the hospital and the village. In 'The Miller', a preponderance of prepositional phrases serves to delineate, 'like a tableau, the settled space-time matrix of the world of the valley' (Hooper 2008: 326). In this story, as in 'The Sisters', the preposition used most frequently of the river is 'across'. On the night they leave, Juriaan watches until 'the last of the lights had twinkled into darkness across the river' before creeping into the ward to fetch Deltje (p. 42). Then, having reached the top of the Groot Kop, they look back down, not at 'the quiet village' below them, but 'across the river ... at the grey stone building standing there alone' (p. 45). The river is a boundary that

isolates the hospital and their experiences in it: making it a 'confined world' (*vide* Roberts) of its own, which they enter and then leave behind them.

The water of the Ghamka River is undrinkable: it is 'so brackish that in marshy lands the ground had always a thin white coating of salt, and for drinking purposes rain-water was stored in iron tanks' (pp. 39–40). Unexceptional to the people of Platkops who are used to it, this tank water becomes abhorrent to Deltje. Nurse Robert is bright, hard, self-confident and young, and unable to understand this 'unreasonable distaste' (p. 40). Interestingly, the narrator also calls it a 'whimsy', signalling a distance from Deltje's 'delirium' (Ridge 1983:210) which ensues:

... [H]er mind dwelt more and more on the brown bubbling mountain stream which for fifty years had quenched her thirst. There came a day when in her weakness her talk wandered brokenly from the stream by the peach-trees to the well of Bethlehem, and from David's cry for the water of that well, to the River of Water of Life.' (p. 40)

As the critics point out, the Biblical water which 'eternally satisfies thirst' (Cosser 1992:93) is associated in her mind now with the mountain stream at their home. Its quotidian reality is thus spiritually transformed. On their journey home, she anticipates restoration to the lives they led before; of 'lying through the night by Juriaan's side' (p. 44); of 'sitting by the stream and drinking of its clear brown water' (p. 43). As Gardiner (1983:85) notices, the connection between the water of the stream and the sensations in her heart is registered quietly in the narrative comment that follows: 'She lay back among the pillows, a gentle, dying woman, her heart overflowing with its quiet content'.

Deltje's longing evinces a choice: a rejection of the rain water she is given in favour of the stream by their home. In 'Desolation', Alie van Staden has no such choice. Unlike the other stories, it is not set in the Little Karoo. It begins on the farm Koelkuil in the 'Verlatenheid' after the death of Alie's son Stephan; and traces her trek with her grandson Koos and her animals, through the stretch of the Great Karoo to the north of the Zwartkops Mountains, to Hermansdorp. The emphasis throughout the story is on the drought which has damaged the region and all who live in it. The absence of water is thus the driving force of the action; its presence registered only in the mirages that taunt the two on their journey, and in Alie's memories.

The drought is 'the worst that any middle-aged man in the Verlatenheid remembered' (p. 163). Deprived of water, plant life dies, and animals parch and starve, and suffer before dying too. 'Slowly, steadily, the grey earth became greyer, the bare kopjes barer ... all the humbler creatures of the veld – died out of ken', and the cattle, sheep, ostriches and donkeys search vainly for food until 'slowly, steadily, their famished bodies were gathered into the receiving earth and turned again to the dust from which they had sprung (p. 164). The drought impacts also the relations among

people on the farm. It exacerbates the ongoing conflict between the 'master' Godlieb Bezedenhout and Alie's son Stephan, and, tormented by her silence, when Stephan dies Bezedenhout is relieved that 'now old Alie must go' (p. 165). As an itinerant poor white she has no home, so the drought strips her and her grandson of any place to be in the world. After burying her son, Alie sits with her grandson on the stone step in front of their door, staring out over the 'Verlatenheid', that:

[D]reary stretch of the Great Karoo which ... takes its name from the desolation which nature displays here in the grey volcanic harshness of its kopjes and the scanty vegetation of its veld. (p. 161)

Smith's choice of 'desolation' for the Afrikaans 'Verlatenheid' serves the fictional purpose of linking psychic with spatial landscape (Hooper 1999:40); it also serves to emphasise the unrelenting absence of water. On their journey through this region, every *kuil* (waterhole) they pass is 'dry, and near every *kuil* were the skeletons of donkeys and sheep which had come there but to perish of their thirst' (Smith 1925:174–175). On the second day, they reach a slimy waterhole with a 'small pool' at which Alie can water her flock and donkeys, but the veld 'yields no grazing' and three of her sheep die by nightfall (p. 176). On the third day, they reach the Hermansdorp dam on which she has set her hopes, only to find it empty. On the fourth day, they get to the Hermansdorp coffeehouse, but the town too is dry:

[L]ike the thorn-trees at the dam, the trees were bare, and the furrows at the roots all waterless. In the open roadway the dust lay deep in ruts, and here, as in the veld, the wind which raised the dust in stinging blinding clouds had the bitter cold of winter drought. (p. 187).

On their journey, water has made fleeting, deceptive, appearances in the mirages which beset them. Once they strike north, the country ahead is 'flat as a calm grey sea, its veld unbroken by any kopje':

Yet in the shimmering heat of noon this sea became a strange fantastic world that slipped into being, vanished, and slipped into being again as they gazed upon it. Around them now were ridges of hills where no hills could be, banks of trees where no trees grew, and water that was not water lying in sheets and lakes out of which rose strange dark islands and cliffs. (p. 175)

The boy finds these phenomena mysterious, yet they reinforce his sense of safety and security in the company of his grandmother. Given the brutal separation that awaits, it is security as false as the mirages of water that taunt them. The absence of water is reflected with greatest pathos in the image of the donkeys' thirst. On the third day, their 'going' becomes 'a painful somnambulistic crawl'. Alie walks beside them:

From time to time they turned towards her seeking with their tongues such moisture as her clothes might hold. And always when they did so she would speak to them quietly, as if speaking to children, of the Hermansdorp dam. (p. 178)

The relief from suffering they seek is water. But the only relief she can offer is a promise of water in the dam that will soon prove as empty as the dam is dry.

What sustains Alie on this dire trek is the memory of water. A woman of 'little imagination' (p. 169), her mind escapes the melancholy of the *Verlatenheid* only by recalling her 6-month stay in Hermansdorp as a young girl, making mattresses with her mother's cousin. Water suffuses this memory. Before they leave, what she sees is not the *Verlatenheid*, but:

[T]he long low line of hills to the north, in a fold of which lay the village, with near it, in the shade of a clump of thorn-trees, a dam where men and women journeying to the dorp for Sacrament, outspanned their carts and wagons. (pp. 169–170)

The Hermansdorp dam has been, for over 50 years, the 'last outspan on entering the dorp' and 'the first upon leaving it', where travellers water their flocks and draught animals. What Alie remembers of Hermansdorp itself are its white-washed buildings, and its 'long wide straight Kerk Straat' with 'running furrows of clear water', and an avenue of pear trees in blossom (p. 170). Dark cypresses and plentiful food turn the village she knows from the past into an oasis in the desert.

Some three decades ago, scientist Benveniste undertook studies which claimed that serial dilutions did not erase the 'memory' water retained of substances previously dissolved in it (Davenas et al 1988). More relevant for Alie's 'memory of water', perhaps, is French historian Nora's 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' which claimed that memory, 'insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it' (Nora 1989:8); and that memory 'takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects' (Nora 1989:9) – including, we would say, water. Hermansdorp, when Alie and Koos reach it, becomes for her a 'third space' (to use Soja's term 1996:56) in which the real and the remembered come together. Unable to find the home she stayed in as a girl, and brushed off by the owner of the store she and her cousin supplied with mattresses, the two stumble upon the 'orphan-house' and Koos is arbitrarily swept up into its ambit. Alie makes her tortuous way alone back to the coffee house. The mattress-making of her youth then fills her mind; and the water used for it infuses her embodied memory as she sits dying. Awkward and 'stiff with labour and old age' (p. 171), her 'bent fingers began to play in her lap – teasing the coir as once long ago she had teased it: dipping it into the bucket at her side: shaking it: teasing it: spreading it out in the sun to dry ...' (p. 198). The woman who finds her shakes her shoulder and speaks to her, but she does not hear. Unlike Niccoline Johanna's mother, over whose face and chest water travels, and unlike the miller, whose body registers and reacts to the chill of water that is brought him, Alie's body is imbued only with the memory of water as she dies. 'A little while longer she played with the coir – teasing it, plucking it – then at last her fingers grew still' (p. 198).

Our purpose in this essay has been exploratory. Smith's stories are not, *per se*, 'environmental fiction' as Buell (1995:7) defined it. While water certainly supplies a context and a backdrop, however, it is a lot more than a 'framing device': it is, frequently, a critical 'presence', or, as in this last story, a critical absence. Water can carry spiritual force; it may need to be persuaded or allowed; it may exert natural justice when transgressions occur. Human action and experience in Smith's stories are 'interdependent with and transfused by' the 'ecological processes and natural energy cycles' of water (Zapf 2016:79); and water infiltrates their 'ecological space', the 'nonlinear complex feedback relationships' that exist between them (Zapf 2008:852–853). While water is not given intention or consciousness, Smith's narratives render the impacts of its agency finely and faithfully. The energetic processes of its valency, its affinity to react with and affect characters and events in special ways, is amply clear.

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