

# Critique, hesitation, death: Reflections on Koos Prinsloo's *Weifeling*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper focuses on Koos Prinsloo's Weifeling, the last collection of fiction to appear in the writer's brief career. In this article it is argued that Prinsloo's work is characterized in the first instance by an oppositional practice driven by a will to reveal which involves, inter alia, a collapse of the distinction between the private and the public. This revelatory urge is, however, compromised by residual attachment and a self-reflective practice which deconstructs the identity of the self even as it is revealed. Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodernism's ethical stance as one of "complicitous critique" and a strategically modified version of her description of postmodernist fiction as "historiographic metafiction" are used to theorize this aspect of Prinsloo's writing, although the texts under discussion remain undeniably more critical than complicit in their practice. Finally, the confrontations with death in the closing texts of Weifeling are linked to Brian McHale's arguments about postmodernism's characteristic foregrounding of ontological differences.*

## 1. Introduction

In little over a decade the controversial, yet widely respected Afrikaans writer Koos Prinsloo, published four brief collections of short fiction. His first volume appeared in 1982 under the title *Jonkmanskas* (a traditional item of furniture, meaning 'bachelor's cupboard' in literal translation), followed in 1987 at the height of the P.W. Botha emergencies by *Die hemel help ons* (*Heaven help us*) and late in 1992, by what is widely regarded as his masterpiece, *Slagplaas* (*Abattoir* or perhaps, after Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse*). His fourth and last work,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an elaboration of a review that appeared in the *Southern African Reviews of Books* under the title "Confrontations" (6.1: 1994). It is written in English in the hope that it may stimulate interest in Prinsloo's work outside the Afrikaans literary world.

*Weifeling*, a term roughly translatable as 'hesitation' or 'irresolution', appeared last year, only a few months before Prinsloo's death. It represents a final intensification in the literary output of a writer who had gained a reputation as an unhurried and meticulous craftsman, unrivalled in contemporary Afrikaans prose.

At the risk of sounding hackneyed, Prinsloo is perhaps best described as the writer of carefully constructed 'texts'. This often obfuscatory term here seems unusually appropriate, since Prinsloo's writing mostly confounds traditional categories. Deliberately situated on the border between 'fact' and 'fiction', his short prose pieces have, since the *Jonkmanskas* collection, rendered conventional distinctions opaque. Blending various text fragments, styles and voices in what is often vaguely called a 'postmodern' manner and characteristically joining the journalistic and the autobiographical, Prinsloo at his best succeeds in evoking an emotionally charged prose of unusual imaginative density which hovers between a mode of – sometimes narcissistic, sometimes distanced – personal confession and a strident form of social critique. Needless to say, this type of writing, which often presents recognizable figures (including the author's friends and family members) in highly compromising – if fictionalized – contexts, is controversial and accounts for much of the succulent reputation which Prinsloo enjoyed on the gossip circuit of the Afrikaans cultural scene.

This essay deals with only the last – and shortest – of Prinsloo's books, and then only in a fragmentary way. Nevertheless, this slim volume containing only seven texts comprising a brief 81 pages, may be regarded as in some sense a closing statement consolidating Prinsloo's major concerns and culminating in a remarkable meditation on and representation of death in literature. As such, it provides the critic with an opportunity to reflect on the many difficult and disturbing issues raised in Prinsloo's brief career.

## **2. The will to reveal (or, coming out of the closet)**

Much of the disruptive vigour of Prinsloo's social critique is drawn from the gay sexuality which pervades his work. Increasingly in his later writing, an explicit and assertive gay identity drawing strongly on contemporary North American activism (a central figure in *Slagplaas* is, for example, simply described as 'the North American') collides with the restrictive norms of society. Interestingly, the clash with the strictures of the nuclear family or the father/son relationship is extended in *Weifeling* to include a hostile engagement with an older, aestheticized and closeted form of homosexuality. In "A portrait of the artist", the opening text of *Weifeling*, the writing 'I' is, for example, projected into the figure of a 'younger writer' who is set in an ambivalent relationship with an older mentor. The older man's sublimated desires – not least for his young protégé – are gradually revealed in a number of encounters between the two men and through a

series of letters addressed to the younger man. In the course of the narrative, the compromised sexuality and integrity of the older man, *illustrated* in the aestheticized and erudite but evasive and essentially dishonest prose of the quoted letters, is revealed. Against this is ranged a different literary practice which the text self-consciously, through the use of an extended footnote discussing the work and life of Raymond Carver, labels 'dirty realism'. The sordid 'realities' buried in the older man's lofty prose become the preoccupation of the younger writer. In the 'new' writing, the silences of a discourse which has traditionally consented to its own suppression willy-nilly find a voice. The text culminates in a passage where the younger writer on his way to the 'glory holes' of a suburban pickup spot fleetingly glimpses the older man "waar hy voor die urinaal na die man ('n bergie of gewone ou *rough trade*?) langs hom staan" ['where in front of the urinal he is staring at the man ('n *bergie* or a common old rough trade?) next to him']. The younger man hesitates for a moment before boarding the train to his illicit destination (26).<sup>2</sup>

In "A portrait of the artist" two figures and discourses meet – and clash: the evasive language of the older writer's sublimated homosexual desire which only finds "expression in his work disguised as a consequence of Romanticism, 19th century Decadence, part of the *fin de siècle*" (23) and the contextualising, descriptive language associated with the young gay's promiscuous sexual practice. This is an obvious example of double coding: homosexual experience first encoded in the highbrow artistic idiom of the older man, then recoded in the 'realistic' variant of his young protégé. We shall have occasion to return to this doubling; at present, I merely wish to note that the 'portrait' referred to in the title is in fact a split image. What the text presents is not one but two mutually antagonistic artistic figures and practices, the second of which is clearly intended as a demystification or corrective of the first.

The ethical thrust of Prinsloo's subversive practice may then in the first instance be described as the consequence of a will to reveal – a coming out of the closet – that extends far beyond the mere assertion of 'deviant' sexuality. Henceforth, nothing will thwart the need to confess and display the 'truth' of homosexual experience; hypocrisy will no longer hood (or deflect) the observing eye of the writer. (This urge is prefigured in the title of Prinsloo's first book which in literal translation simply means 'young man's cupboard or closet'.) In Prinsloo's *oeuvre* this revelatory fervour gradually becomes a fully blown and self-conscious literary enterprise – a discursive mode if you will – which involves, amongst many other things, a collapse of the distinction between the private and the public. In his translation into a literary practice of an angry refusal to accept the

<sup>2</sup> Page numbers refer to Prinsloo, K. 1993. *Weifeling*. Groenkloof: Hond.

concealments, suppressions and displacements of a dominant discourse, Prinsloo is, of course, not alone. His savage honesty echoes the often bleak revelatory practices of such predecessors as Jean Genet, Hervé Guibert and a host of contemporary North Americans (the most recent sensation seems to be that surrounding David Leavitt's 'rewriting' of Sir Stephen Spender's autobiography).

"A portrait of the artist" again provides a good example. It opens with a subjunctive passage in which the younger writer imagines the older man's introduction of their story. In the older writer's version the betrayal involved in writing honestly about a mentor/student relationship creates an ethical quandary which leads to obfuscation and effectively places a taboo on the honest depiction of the subject. For the third person narrator who takes over in the second paragraph and whose perspective is closely linked to that of the younger writer no such fear exists. On the contrary, the tale that follows involves just such a betrayal: the older writer – mercilessly unmasked in the course of the narrative and named in the second footnote – closely resembles an established Afrikaans literary figure. The point here is not so much the gossip value of such a practice nor the veneer of fictionality which the text constructs but the fact that betrayal is often a necessary consequence of the ethical imperative – speaking the name of the previously unsaid – driving this aspect of Prinsloo's literary project. The private life of the writer is no longer to be kept discretely outside the public sphere of his writing for that would involve an intolerable concealment.

The figure of the younger writer is carried forward into "Die jas" ("The coat"), the second text of the collection. Here he is set against another of the powerful fathers of the literary scene, the publisher. Again the text draws on what is conventionally presented as trivial and marginal to the literary endeavour. Again the unfolding of the narrative involves the relentless unmasking of an older, sexually compromised authority figure, the difference being that the anger driving the attack is here even more strident – less compromised by residual attachment – than in the previous text. The gossip surrounding the relationship between writer and publisher, normally banished from the sphere of polite conversation and public discourse, is here revealed as the stuff of a power struggle which involves issues of integrity and censure. When the writer is, for example, asked to purge a reference to the publisher's son, when he is in effect asked to censor his work in order to protect the reputation of the established man, the logic of his enterprise compels him to refuse and we duly read not only about the errant son but about the father himself. The dishonesties of the older man's private life are exposed as the props of his powerful public position and his economic exploitation of the writer.

The clash between a revelatory urge and the compromises forced upon the suffering gay figure by the denials of a family interested in safeguarding its

reputation and a self-deprecating homosexual culture steeped in hypocrisy is again developed in "Die storie van my neef" ("The story of my cousin"). Here the rumours and reports surrounding a dying Aids sufferer infect the very language used by the narrator and form the core of a story which is primarily about silence, betrayal and concealment: the victim, Bennie, we are informed at the close of the story, told his family "he got it from a blood transfusion".

### 3. Irresolution (or, complicit critique)

There is, however, a complicating factor in the demystificatory practice of Prinsloo's prose. The peculiar strength of his writing in this collection does not, it seems to me, lie merely in the force of its negative thrust nor in its assertion of a 'true' perspective on matters such as homosexual experience; rather it is precisely its refusal (or inability) to mount an unequivocal critique of the dominant that strikes one as particularly compelling. The emotional force of the oedipal rebellion depicted in many of these stories flows partly from the ambivalence of their critique. The moral high ground occupied by the various narrators in *Weifeling* is a treacherous height; the fractious son in his various guises is never simply at a comfortable distance from the world he criticizes. He is both inside and outside it; despite his fervour, he is deeply invested in the objects of his anger. In the third footnote to "A portrait of the artist" the younger writer, for example, quotes himself quoting Emmanuel Reynaud: "'The marks of his (the son's) initiation are so deeply engraved in him that his eventual rebellion against his father is usually not more than the substitution of another one ... fathers are like weeds – they grow everywhere.'" (27)

This is, of course, what accounts for much of the disturbing appeal of these stories, and for the fact that a text like "Die jas", in which the anger becomes distant and uncomplicated by vestigial loyalty (although even here there is a self-conscious realization that the younger writer is implicated in the power game he is ostensibly debunking), strikes one as somewhat self-indulgent and emotionally flat when compared to texts like "Die storie van my pa" ("The story of my father"). There the narrator compulsively listens and relists to the recording of his father's voice on his telephone answering machine. In one quasi-lyrical formulation he refers to his father thus: "my arme, arme, o so verstote, o so beduiwelde, o tot die dood toe bedroef en bedonderde, arme stokoue fokken ou pa" ("o my poor, poor, o so spurned, o so obstreperous, o unto death grieved and peeved, poor ancient fucking old father") (68). Not only is there a deep bond that ties the son to the father and which depicts the father as just another victim of circumstance but the writing 'I' often actually slips into the parental idiom; he is not only emotionally but linguistically bound up with the very domination he wishes to subvert. In "A portrait of the artist" the younger writer's debt to the

older – his erudition, his cultured elitism, the sense of being a *homme de lettres* amidst the philistines – is often apparent. In “Die storie van my pa” the narrator’s lover repeatedly reminds him that he sounds like his parents: “‘jy klink darem nou net soos jou pa’” (“‘you sound exactly like your father’”) (67). This sets in motion a logic where the reader continually recognizes the voice of the father not only in the numerous direct quotes but also in the slightly archaic turn of phrase used by the narrator; the father is literally heard in the voice of the son and this dramatizes *on the level of language* the ambivalence of the son’s revolt. Here too the angry son finally hesitates in his urge to tell all. In the previous story, he has already revealed himself to the reader as an Aids victim. Here he imagines writing a confrontational letter to the father, but one which will provisionally keep silent about the son’s terrible secret. That final, vengeful revelation which will presumably devastate the father – and which is the son’s final ironic revenge – is reserved for a later moment. It is with a shock that the reader becomes aware that the story he/she is reading is that moment.

It is this ambivalent aspect of Prinsloo’s oppositional practice that I think is best described as postmodernist. Here for once this overworked term seems to have some cogency in its applicability to a South African literary practice. For if modernism is above all an oppositional art form, the term ‘post-modernism’ may well be reserved for the curiously compromised form of critique typical of the texts in *Weifeling*. This is of course what Linda Hutcheon captures in her oxymoronic formulation of postmodernism’s characteristic ethical stance as “complicitous critique” (Hutcheon, 1988:201-221 & 1989:1-23). Unlike the uncompromising negativity of the modernist work of art, the postmodernist text, on Hutcheon’s account, acknowledges its *complicity* with the dominant culture while at the same time mounting a critique of it from within. “Yet, it must be admitted from the start that this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyse and maybe even undermine” (Hutcheon, 1989:4). Postmodernism both inscribes and subverts the dominant; it is in some sense a demystificatory practice trapped on the inside, unable to command a view of the whole and therefore unwilling finally to ‘resolve’ on a position.

Here then we glimpse a first interpretative possibility for the title of Prinsloo’s collection, for if complicitous critique typifies the ethical stance of the post-modernist work of art, ‘weifeling’ or ‘irresolution’ is its key *topos*. When the younger writer at the close of “A portrait of the artist”, having spotted the older man in the station toilets, ‘hesitates’ (‘weifel’) for a moment’ before disappearing ‘as if into oblivion’ (26, my emphasis), it is an exemplary moment for the collection as a whole. It is not only the hesitation of the character which is here described, but the irresolution of a text split between the contradictory literary

traditions represented by the two writers and presented in the two codes or discursive modes referred to above. In this sense "A portrait of the artist" is not only *about* the irresolution of the younger figure and the narrating instance, but is also *formally* 'irresolute'. Important to note in the closing passage is again the use of the subjunctive, for while the younger man seemingly chooses to reject the older when he 'disappears' 'without looking back', this 'resolution' is rendered contingent by its 'as if' formulation.

Another of Hutcheon's well known and related categories – in a somewhat modified version – is useful in extending the argument about Prinsloo's postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction is best described as 'historiographic metafiction'. This genre category is an attempt to label the self-reflexive form of the contemporary historical novel which aspires to some account of historical reality while at the same time questioning the very tenets of traditional historiography and the realist epistemology of the traditional historical novel. Historiographic metafiction shows up the malleability of the past by exposing it as a construct of the present; it questions the notion of an unmediated access to the historical referent, reminding us that the past is accessible to us only as discourse and is therefore never more than relatively knowable. It is clear that the 'historiographic' aspect of Hutcheon's formulation is not immediately applicable to Prinsloo's prose. For while these stories are obviously metafictional in their self-reflexivity, they are often intensely personal, touching hardly at all on public history in any conventional sense. However, if, as is the case in Prinsloo's writing – or for that matter, much feminist work – the distinction between the private and the public is erased, there seems to be a compelling argument in favour of extending Hutcheon's category to include those 'autobiographic metafiction's'<sup>3</sup> which submit subjective experience or the authors' life stories to the displacements of the metafictional form.

Again the opening text of *Weifeling* is exemplary. The intensely self-conscious literary references already evident in the Joycean title ("A portrait of the artist") but expansively pursued both in the main body of the text and in a series of extended footnotes<sup>4</sup> are clearly intended to show the mediating role of language and literary tradition in the fictional representation of the self and its past. Just as

<sup>3</sup> Brian McHale (1992:21) has cogently argued this point:

If, as the feminist slogan runs, the personal *is* the political, then fictions that address the personal history (one's own or someone else's) in the same questioning way that historiographic metafiction addresses, public history also deserve to be included in the postmodernist category.

<sup>4</sup> Reference is made to, amongst others, Maupassant, Flaubert, Hennie Aucamp, Emmanuel Reynaud, William Empson, Raymond Carver, Tess Gallagher, Chekhov and Hemingway.

the historical referent is only accessible through discourse, the construction of the self and its experiences necessarily passes through a literary shaping which involves, amongst many other things, a complex intertextual 'layering'. "A portrait of the artist" like all metafiction – whether autobiographic or historiographic – thus flaunts its status as a literary construct; personal experience is here self-consciously encoded and recoded: male homosexual desire first sublimated as self-indulgent and evasive romanticism, then inscribed in dirty realist mode. What the metafictional practice of the text emphasizes, however, is that the 'realism' associated with the younger writer is no less a literary product than the romanticism of the older man; experience is never transparently available in fiction, it is always already a construct bearing the imprint of its making.

This discursive self-consciousness further complicates the oppositional practice of these fictions, rendering what may be called their politics highly problematic. For if the will to reveal is already compromised by residual attachment and unresolved tensions, submitting the self to the defamiliarizations of the metafictional form only serves to heighten its 'irresolution'. If the 'I' and its experiences can only be approached through complicated literary objectifications and mediations, the previously suppressed world to be asserted in the new practice is rendered highly problematic; if parodic reflexivity can work to turn the dominant "into a site of de-naturalizing critique" (Hutcheon, 1989:3) as it clearly does in the case of the older man's discourse in "A portrait of the artist", this metafictional logic does the same deconstructive damage to the 'site' of the previously marginal with fairly devastating consequences for the 'true' perspective needed to sustain a demystificatory and corrective practice. In short, the revelatory urge is compromised because the 'truth' is deconstructed even as it is revealed.

It is, however, possible to overstate the complicity of Prinsloo's critical engagement of the dominant. Texts such as "A portrait of the artist" and "Die storie van my pa" hover on the edge of unequivocal critique; while the critical impulse may be unable to 'resolve' into a fully blown oppositional practice for the reasons sketched above, it is equally obvious that the balance between complicity and critique in these and the other stories of *Weifeling* is tipped in favour of the latter. This seems to me to be the weakness in Hutcheon's theory: the hugely diverse productions of postmodernism are collapsed into the same rather trite formulations ("complicitous critique" "irresolution" etc.)<sup>5</sup> leaving us unable to weight

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<sup>5</sup> Brian McHale (1992a:22) has pointed out the "cookie cutter" sameness" of Hutcheon's interpretations:

This is the implicit message of Hutcheon's lists: all postmodernist novels are interchangeable, all of them, at some level, mean the same thing. ... And what they mean is 'irresolution'.

the practice of a given text as either predominantly critical or predominantly complicit. This is not an easy matter,<sup>6</sup> but perhaps “A portrait of the artist” may again be helpful. Here two competing narrative constructions of the self and its (homosexual) desires are presented, and, while the text hesitates between options, it is clear that the dirty realist version is a counter-story designed to strategically engage and demystify the first.

Perhaps Brian McHale’s suggestion regarding the ‘turning down’<sup>7</sup> or ‘weakening’ of master narratives and truth claims is appropriate here:

But if all our stories ... big or little, are strategic fictions, if all our categories are constructions, this does not mean that they are all equally good stories, equally sound constructions. It makes a difference which story or variant we choose to tell... [although] our criteria of choice can hardly be criteria of objective truth, given that the ‘object’ about which the discourse may be said to be true (or false) has been constructed by that discourse itself. (McHale, 1992b:26.)

The alternative ‘story’ presented in “A portrait of the artist” may not be able to ground itself in a superior truth claim; indeed, it self-consciously displays its ‘constructedness’ and undermines its final resolution through techniques such as the subjunctive mode of its ending. Nevertheless, perhaps because it is presented in this attenuated form, its affective – and ethical – thrust remains undeniably, if problematically, more critical than complicit. McHale (1992a:32) captures something of this spirit when he writes:

I would like to believe that, if we can learn to entertain master narratives not as they are intended to be entertained but in the key of as-if, and if we begin

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<sup>6</sup> I am unaware of any theory of postmodernism which is able to resolve the difficulties associated with distinguishing what McHale calls the diagnostic from the merely ‘symptomatic’ in postmodern culture. Even Fredric Jameson, whose writing on postmodernism is highly regarded by critics such as McHale, is not immune to similar criticism:

We learn many things from Jameson’s readings: but what we do not learn is why certain texts ... are to be regarded as critical of postmodern culture while others ... are evidently irremediably complicit. (McHale, 1992a:30.)

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to Donald Barthelme’s program for undoing patriarchy, set forth in his *Manual for Sons*:

*Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least ‘turned down’ in this generation – by the combined efforts of all of us together. Rejoice. (Barthelme, in McHale, 1992a:32)*

telling our own stories in the same as-if key, then the very nature of the discursive struggle will be altered before long, and for the better.

## **5. Death rehearsed (or, postmodernism as the *ars moriendi*)**

As should be apparent from much of the preceding, there is another even more sombre and conflicted confrontation being rehearsed in *Weifeling*. It is already there in *Slagplaas* but in the last collection it has become a dominant concern. In one sense, *Weifeling* is a sustained set of literary imaginings on the theme of death. The footnotes of the first text already make extensive reference to the deaths of two literary figures, Chekov and Carver; not only alternative representations of desire and sexuality are explored in "A portrait of the artist", the experience of death and its narrative construction also emerge as major issues of the literary imagination. But it is really the last three stories of the collection that form a kind of death trilogy. Here the narrator, first in an autobiographical guise, and then objectified in the image of a psychologist, confronts death as his primary subject and his personal destiny.

Clearly, the self-reflexivity in these fictions problematizes representation and the unity of the writing subject; in what we have called Prinsloo's autobiographic metafiction it becomes an exploration of the way in which the self in its multiple guises and experiences is structured through narrative and imagery. But in an interview with Ryk Hattingh granted after the publication of *Slagplaas*, Prinsloo, quoting Brian McHale, also connects this type of self-reflective writing to a confrontation with death: "Texts about themselves, self-reflective, self-conscious texts are also, as if inevitably, about death, precisely because they are about ontological differences and the transgression of ontological boundaries"; and, quoting McHale quoting Gabriel Josipovici: "The shattering of the fictional illusion leaves the reader 'outside' the fictional consciousness with which he or she has been identifying, for the reader to give up his consciousness and, by analogy, to give up her or his own, in a kind of dress rehearsal for death" (Hattingh, 1993:26). These passages are highly suggestive for a reading of *Weifeling* and it is perhaps here that we glimpse the most sombre and compelling aspect of Prinsloo's postmodernism. In McHale's construction of the category, postmodernist fiction is not so much coextensive with historiographic – or, for that matter, autobiographic – metafiction; rather, it is characterized by a foregrounding of ontological themes and ontological structure. This seems immediately appropriate to Prinsloo's work from the earliest collection to the last where (as we have seen) boundaries between worlds – the factual and the fictional, the public and the private, to name but two – are habitually and characteristically violated and thus foregrounded. What is so striking about the closing texts of *Weifeling* is that the link between this practice and the representation of death in literature is exploited to the full; the implications of the metafictional form are here made explicit at the level of

content. It is as though Prinsloo's self-reflexivity *necessarily* culminates in this confrontation with the representation of death, as though it is here discovering its own strangely profound – and for Prinsloo portentous – meaning.

Death is the one ontological boundary that we are all certain to experience, the only one we shall all inevitably have to cross. In a sense, every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way. (McHale, 1992b:231.)

In “Die storie van ’n slapelose man” (“The story of an insomniac”), the final text of *Weifeling*, a therapist's sleepless ruminations about the suicide of a female patient are interrupted by a metafictional passage in which ‘the writer’ doubts the credibility of his character and contemplates alternative lines of development. Clearly, this ‘shattering of the fictional illusion’ is meant to function in just the way described above, leaving the reader face to face with ‘ontological difference’ and thus confronting his/her death. When he/she returns to the therapist in his study the man is listening to Gesualdo's penance for the murder of his family and reading Cioran's *Précis de Décomposition* (“The notion of destroying ourselves, ... the multiplicity of means for doing so, their ease and their proximity delight us and fill us with dread; ... for there is nothing simpler and more terrible than the action by which we decide irrevocably upon ourselves ...” [80]). It is only after a wakeful dream sequence during which the writer imagines (note the metafictional doubling) the therapist experiencing his own death – only after an imaginary confrontation with his own ‘bloated corpse’ dredged up from the depths – that he can finally fall into a pill-induced sleep. This is the closing passage of *Weifeling* – indeed, the closing passage of Prinsloo's *oeuvre* – and an extraordinary moment in which ‘writer’, character and reader are united in the experience/anticipation of death. It is a remarkable literary simulation of death in which Prinsloo's postmodernism recovers an unexpectedly poignant representational capacity – a “kleedrepetisie vir die dood” (‘a dress rehearsal for death’) as Prinsloo put it in the Hattingh interview – in which the autobiographical echoes of Prinsloo's technique – the transgression of the boundary between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ – take on a truly ominous ring.

I wish to close with another quote from Brian McHale, whose writing has proved so congenial to Prinsloo's practice:

Postmodernist writing enables us to experiment with imagining our own deaths, to *rehearse* our own deaths. We have all but lost the *ars moriendi*; we no longer have anyone to teach us how to die well, or at least no one we can trust or take seriously. Postmodernist writing may be one of our last resources for preparing ourselves, in imagination, for the single act which

we must assuredly all perform unaided, with no hope of doing it over if we get it wrong the first time. (McHale, 1992b:232.)

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