

Stephen Gray

Some Notes on Further Readings of Wilma Stockenström's Slave Narrative, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*

Abstract

This article considers some aspects of Wilma Stockenström's novella of 1981, *Die Kremetartekspedisie*, in its English translation by J.M. Coetzee of 1983, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. After isolating the formal aspects which are characteristic of the structure of the work, as explained by the author in the text, it reviews and identifies a general reluctance in the responses to date to engage with the text in terms it sets for itself. Arising out of this deadlock situation, the article suggests some approaches which could more appropriately be applied in further readings of the work. These are with regard to the author's use of: (a) received South African history and (b) narrative mode, both of which contribute to the beginnings of the formation of a new, particularly female, consciousness and scope in South African fiction.

Possession and loving are concepts that damn each other. I did not want to be as he and the others, all the others in my life, from my earliest memories of huts and mother and security in a misty, sultry forest basin, from my memories of the lascivious man who bought me to deflower me, and the spice merchant whose labours I had to endure grinding my teeth, and I did not want to be as they all regarded me, all of them, my benefactor with his fatherliness and this one too, this man whom I embraced with my whole body and allowed to come into me time after time so as to be absolutely full of him, absolutely convulsively full and rich and fulfilled, floating, seed-satisfied, making him, self-content, part of me, of me exclusively - he too, he who had just described me analytically and disposed of me like an object in a dispensation, even he, different from what they all thought, utterly different from what anyone might think, I rejected all the opinions, all the observations and reprimands of all women in my life, what did they know of who I was, what did any of them know.

(Stockenström, 1983:51-2)

Formal aspects

This passage, which comes midway in Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, is the central focus of the novella - its explanation, its statement and its summary. Since almost all of this elusive and evasive work is given over to the main character's attempts to achieve synthesis between the past and the present, to gain a clear grasp on memory and hence a new sense of self, this is the still centre of the work, where all the lines converge, and from which they radiate. To use Stockenström's own metaphor (12-13, 99)¹, it is the central "bead" in a "necklace" of words, strung together with a symmetry and fastidiousness that demands careful reading.

¹ Page numbers refer to Stockenström, 1983. *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. London: Faber & Faber. Translated by J.M. Coetzee from the Afrikaans *Die Kremetartekspedisie* (1981).

Two other metaphors indicate that the work is intended to have this structural design. In an apparently gratuitous description of a tornado striking a coastal city, the narrator recalls its shape at the climax:

The sea drew back hissing over its destruction, drew in a last tortured, foaming breath, and subsided to a gloomy calm, and the wind subsided too, leaving such a rarefied stillness that a sob could have shattered it.

This brittle peace lasted only briefly At once it began pouring rain A storm with a mission (26)

The work begins as it ends, with the unfolding and folding of the narrative consciousness. At the beginning the following is read:

How I sometimes stretched out my night, curling myself up into the smallest possible bundle in the darkest hollow, forehead pressed against knees to kill the gnawing within myself, entangled in confused thoughts I woke up crumpled, sat up lightheartedly unsteady, and set a dusty foot down in the great assegai-blade of sunlight that bores all day with a steady murderous twist into my dwelling. (7)

At the end the last two sentences are:

I will find rest in the upside-down. I fold my wings. (111)

Between these opening and closing brackets, as it were, the work proceeds as one seamless stream of consciousness. "Stream" is to be taken rather literally here, as Stockenström frequently prompts her readers with the metaphor of water, its continuity and its protean nature. Her heroine, if she is allied with any element in her alien cosmography, is closest to the water-sprite. Thus the narrative flows, swells, subsides with a temperament of its own, the analogue of the fluid state of dream-recollection. The first paragraph states this boldly: "... to dream outward, for the seventh sense is sleep" (7). The function of the water-dream imagery within the narrative is to locate the unrealisable, to express the imperceptible, so that the main activity of the work is the central character's attempt to catch up and order experience, to contain it briefly, as in a clay pot. The statement of the work is revealed fleetingly, that "possession and love are concepts that damn each other"(51). Before and after this realisation there is only routine, bitterness and ridicule - and the extraordinary saga of the life of a nameless, fifteenth-century slave woman, as dreamed by a twentieth-century Afrikaans poetess adept at breaking new ground in South African fiction.

Reception

When the work first appeared as *Die Kremetartekspedisie* in late 1981, there was a welcoming general consensus in the Afrikaans press that it represented a challenging "renewal" in Afrikaans prose (Smuts, 1981:22) and, as the rather parochial blurb of the first edition would have it, a significant "bydrae" to the field. Some reviewers took off from the blurb's misleading comparison of the work with the prose of D.F. Malherbe and C.M. van den Heever, contradicting the view that *Die Kremetartekspedisie* represents a return to the "poetic prose" of the 1950s, specifically to the "sierprosa" tradition of baroque descriptions, particularly of nature (Venter (1981) and Olivier (1982)). Other reviewers, also attempting to insert the work into a well-defined tradition, note more apt comparisons with, for

example, Eugène Marais' similarly mythical folkloric work, *Dwaalstories* (E. Lindenberg). Some mention the work's central feature, its "African" content, but flounder confronting its significance (Mostert (1981) and Lindenberg (1981)). Only one reviewer (Rabie) enlarges the range to incorporate comparisons with English-language South African writers, claiming that the bond of "women writers" is above language differences. In general the reception the work received, although it honours it with respectful attention, is disappointingly disinclined to tackle it in its own terms, as a work that confronts the reader with two new and rare subjects simultaneously: black Africa and a woman's inner consciousness, although Olivier does redress this later (Olivier, 1983).

The reception of the English version also seems to tell us more about the reviewers than the work. A key factor in this new reaction seems to be due to the change in packaging. Where *Die Kremetartekspedisie* featured a front cover of a beautifully designed baobab tree (without a trace of the woman who lives in it - a black woman), the Faber/Ball paperback featured an exotically tribal woman with a mask-like face, couched against what, if it is a tree at all, is certainly not a baobab. A large selling point became André Brink's quote, which stated that the novel was a "harrowing exposé of the humiliations and degradations inflicted on the female body - and a moving celebration of the indomitable nature of the female mind." This is correct in spirit, even if his assessment that the narrative movement is a "spiral" is not quite accurate.

Apart from a brief and encouraging mention in the Johannesburg *Star*, it must be recorded that there was no reaction in the South African English-language press. In the Afrikaans-language press appreciation was expressed for Coetzee's superb translation (Pienaar). Overseas the first review quite correctly called *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* "an ornate meditation on primeval slavery", but then frankly added: "If any oblique allusion to contemporary Azanian servitude is implied here, I missed it" (Glastonbury, 1983:23) - so much for the elliptical allegorical method. (Obviously the work was meant devastatingly to confront its contemporary apartheid South Africa with painful injustices and the brutalities of the master (male)-servant (female) relationship; it is "Azanian" consciousness all the way.) Other reviewers came closer to the work's essence: "... a poignant, bleakly symbolic statement of human dignity intact under layers of disabling deprivation and ill treatment" (Firth, 1983:7) - but the burden of stirred *moral* support for the subject matter of the work tended to disallow its *aesthetic* achievement. In one influential review, tinged with post-feminist ennui over the gender issue ("Stockenström is not the first novelist to identify with womankind"), the connected racial issue is sidestepped - in fact, becomes an extremely snide racial innuendo against Afrikaners (Sweetman, 1983:148). One reviewer, a South African novelist of the same generation, while making a very "correct" appreciation of the work, adduced "double bondage" (both sexual and racial oppression) as the key to it, a conclusion few others have approached (Hope, 1984:99). Only Ampie Coetzee went further and investigated capitalist oppression of slave women in an impressively systematic way, but his scheme disallowed any observation on some of the major aspects of the work. Through individual initiative Stockenström's heroine does occasionally transcend socially determined categories; some examples are:

- * the head slave-girl becomes household manageress - "I had more power than many a wife" (36);
- * the maid-servant becomes mistress (68); and
- * the outcast is not classed as a leper or witch, but achieves freedom (19-2).

So Coetzee's reconstruction ended in reading himself rather at the expense of Stockenström's original.

What, then, having summarized the wide but imperceptive response to Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* in both Afrikaans and English, could further readings of the text reveal? At least two obvious aspects of Stockenström's method would come to the fore, both unexplored in the existing criticism. The first is her use of history, the second her use of narrative mode.

History

History in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is memory, and memory in turn is realisation. (The opening quote here succinctly illustrates this.) The process works at two inter-connected levels: the pragmatic, internal level within the work, where the slave woman's story is her own case history; and the symbolic, external level, where Stockenström is the writer of our own times, writing within the context of today. At the internal level there is one main, violent event which inhibits the onset of memory. When it is eventually recuperated, triggered by a valueless handful of beads, it is terrible enough, but it does release sequence:

Words that had got lost take on dim shape. Mother I see before me, father, brothers, sisters. I see huts and very high trees ... yes, I had had a doll made of bark fibre, the doll had beads around its neck, the head was a club, and I had the doll with me when everyone fled from their huts into the dense underbrush, my mother yanked me by the arm but she was killed, her head was split open and I was jerked out of her grasp We travelled and travelled and then came to a village. The male captives were herded together and something was done to them. Later we set off and travelled further and further and came to a city on a terrible big, immeasurable broad dam, blue from this end to the far end.

Now I have the names for everything: slave, castration, commerce, coastal city, sea, forced labour. Yes now I have it all. (99-100)

During this inland slave-drive, the slave heroine is chosen as the only female; the men (in Stockenström's version at least) are castrated so that in the slave class no reproduction may occur. Her value to the society at large is primarily her reproductive capacity, and the children she bears to her masters are the interest on their initial investment. Her first owner takes her "as one cracks young pods" and by him she becomes a "mother-child" (41). For her second owner, the spice merchant, she bears another child. With her third pregnancy she visits an abortionist, paying him with herself, for she has no possessions to trade. Thereafter she seems to fall pregnant infrequently. This act of rebellion hardly affects her elderly third master, whom she describes as her benefactor's youngest son, who leaves household affairs to her and does not molest her. On his premature death, she is purchased by his red-clocked, blue-lipped, cicatrised captain of dhows and pirate friend, who becomes co-leader of the trading expedition inland during which they are fated to become the sole survivors. With his demise (death by crocodile) she is finally freed of her bondage to men, whom she persists in thinking of as greedy children (79). She is now alone and assumes residence within the hollow, folded trunk of a baobab - the totem in the centre of Africa at which she is able to assemble her story and from within which it is delivered.

With her arrival at the baobab her status is again changed: instead of being a dependent, a chattel, she now becomes a goddess to the "little people" who slavishly provide her with sustenance. As she says on the last page of her ironic story: "I was really a mistress and

mother and goddess. Enough to make you laugh" (111). Although uncertain still, she is now able to approach a herd of elephants without fear, wash and heal herself in the river, raise her ostrich-shell up on high in ecstasy over her recovery. Slowly her personality coheres into becoming that of the wise-woman of the book. The coda destroys this status as well, however, as the "little people" are destroyed by the taller warriors and, finally stripped of all society, she chooses suicide above solitariness. The sheltering, upside-down baobab will eventually combust spontaneously under its own weight, imploding over her as a tomb.

For the women who colluded in her entrapment in the coastal city she has special feelings: "Who are these women who adapted me and mothered me and taught me the game with men? ... playing with me, they taught me so that eventually I would remember the rapture and the torment, but inwardly remain untouched, remain whole, remain myself" (15). Sisterly solidarity is broken, however, in the only case of friendship she experiences. In the first of the two dialogues in the work, her co-worker and she recall their joint history (40-41), and divide their household labours as laundress and cook. But the initiative she takes over the abortion incident divides them, as the friend descends into drudgery and apathy, having in the end only scorn for the narrator as she ascends to become embroiderer and hostess. "My existence was [now] pomp and circumstance," she recalls, "was sparkle and excitement, was shining rippling water over a bed of pebbles" (36). "Sometimes it was pleasantly advantageous and easy to be property" (46). But in the end, despite her status, it is her thwarted maternity that depresses and disarms her; she is haunted by the fear that she might meet her own children in the street and not recognise them. She is forced to transfer her nurturing desires to everyone except those for whom they might have been legitimately reserved - the offspring that she is disallowed from calling her own. Nevertheless, even then she is not provoked into running away and becoming a maroon in the swamps; she conserves her energy in order to survive herself.

In memory alone she achieves the meaning and shape of her history; only outside an exploitative and violent world can she assemble her full potential. Realisation brings the consciousness that she is finally a free agent, and can make choices - if only the choice to die. But in terms of her own myths, and as a water-sprite, she knows she can live again when the time is propitious.

Then, at the present-day outer level, this whole history has to be read as an allegory, out of its terms and into our terms. Some of the themes translate readily enough - the inhumane reduction of rural men and women to urban labour units, the systematic way in which patriarchy maims those on which it depends, the atomisation of the nuclear family, and so on. These are issues of immediate relevance, making *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* of 1981 the intellectual's version of Elsa Joubert's *Poppie Nongena* of 1978. But the very strangeness of Stockenström's work, its novelty and irreducibility, remove it to some extent from too ready correlatory interpretations (the reviews show that none have been attempted).

The key is Stockenström's attitude to history, which is challengingly "non-scientific" and "non-Western"; it is, rather, mythological and culturally anthropological.² One enters a

² Stockenström was clearly influenced by Latin American writers' use of indigenous myth and folklore, and by the "alternative" histories of the U.S. as seen, for example, in Carlos Castaneda's *Don Juan* sequence (from 1968) about Yaqui shamanism. Another source, she has suggested, is Credo Mutwa's works.

strange and refreshingly unfamiliar world when one enters this work. Familiar guidelines are missing. Names (of people, places), locations (of harbour-cities, trade routes, baobabs), national types (Shonas, Arabs, Khoikhoi), dates are not specified. The ostensible reason for this is that the slave heroine does not define herself by this type of data; the novelist's deeper reason is not (as some reviewers incorrectly assume) that the work plays out in some hazy fantasy arena, but that Stockenström wishes the reader to meet the raw experience unmediated by "Western" attitudes to, and preconceptions about, the past and the present.

Incidentally, and for the record, the received Western history is indeed all there. It is almost unbelievable that *no* reviewer has commented on Stockenström's scrupulous use of historical research. But that is the whole point: Stockenström means to show us Africa, when the continent was first touched by white colonisers (Vasco da Gama in 1497); where "our" history begins in Africa, the continent's own history literally goes underground. Hence its escapes in this work is in an old form - oral and mythological. The entire work is to be read as an alternative to our Western historiographical forms. The challenge is as profound as that.

Within this context the task of unravelling the work is immensely enjoyable. (And can it be true that reviewers and writers of articles know so little of "our" early history and "their" history, which we dismiss as "prehistory", that no one has registered that this aspect of the works exists?) The element of historical satire within the text is potent, playfully tongue-in-cheek. Thus, where "our" literature commences with Camoens' *The Lusjads*, here is Stockenström's heroine's view of the arrival of the Portuguese navigators:

To us it seemed as if they suddenly appeared out of nothing, as if they slowly came shifting across the foil of the sea, oh so slowly, in bulky caravels driven by a mass of patched sails with apelike agility. We were not impressed. Or did not make it apparent What can they offer that we do not have? was the general feeling, and the city did not seethe with excitement, not so that it could be seen, and the new arrivals were nonchalantly made welcome, not suspiciously, but still (61)

For one myth-system, Stockenström gives us another. Where Camoens personalises Africa as a raging monster (in the Adamastor story), Stockenström ruminates ironically, unimpressed:

We learned about a land at the other end of the earth's disc and about voyagers who had sailed as far as here all along the edge of the world and about the mighty storms with which the gods tried to drive them over the edge and plunge them into nothingness, and about voices they heard in the howling wind warning them to turn around, and about monsters on land where they wanted to fetch fresh water, about short rests to repair broken yards, about beacons they had erected and about hostile backward peoples, and they pointed, so we learned, at a red sign on their yellow sails and explained that they sailed for their king, these stocky hairy men in thick peculiar garments. (62)

Thus, too, the expedition of the novel becomes a reversed one - from a cultivated Eastern port (like Sofala or Malindi) to discover an easier trade route to Lisbon. (In fact, Stockenström here inverts another Camoens myth, that of the stranded courtly lovers, the Sepulvedas, burning to death in a hostile African desert, by having her heroine thrive both with her lover, and alone, in the arid hinterland.) Other witty inversions are almost too numerous to mention, but amongst them the hilarious "Sanders-of-the-River"-type passage

upstream of black ivory merchants, observed by a giggling slave woman hiding with her nose in the grass, at least needs a mention (75-6).³

This creative playfulness with history extends into provocation in the novella. On p. 69 the slave picks up a "handful of little gold nails", the relics of a former civilisation beneath her baobab abode. ⁴ To the critics of this work these gold nails remain unseen, as do many other details (*African* details) which simply are not registered in the receiving consciousness - Africa's abundant fecundity and vegetation (luxuriously and microscopically described), its cycles of harmony, aggression, tenseness and release, which transmute the continent into one of magnificently felt alternative experience. In reading this work one is invited to be a child again, to marvel, and to listen to the maternal voice of a past which can always become accessible again. Stockenström sees no border between South Africa and Africa, and brings Africa back to us as a whole experience.

That this is accomplished by a *female* writer, and that her (largely) *male* critics cannot locate this accomplishment is no cause for surprise. Alternative histories are hard to become aware of, harder to believe in.

The Expedition to the Baobab Tree is that whole new way of seeing our past and our present.

Narrative mode

A reading in terms of Stockenström's use of narrative mode would also open up the work to a greater extent than has been attempted to date. Consciously or unconsciously (one would hesitate to wager on the latter, for Stockenström is an extremely learned person), the narrative line involves many language usages which are considered to be characteristically feminine. The symmetrical, radiating structure has already been mentioned. The ludic, self-inventing quality of the narrative should be stressed, for like her heroine, Stockenström spends much time trying to jump on the shadow of her own head (71). Much of the narrative is written in the passive voice. Apostrophe is used generously within the interior monologue (to the absent training woman - "I never forget your lessons ... but that has all

³ The central quest - the physical journey towards an inland city, here the city of rose quartz - has its historical roots in the search for Prester John (as E. Lindenberg points out in his review). In English literature works as distinct as Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) and Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) use the same myth. In South Africa itself actual searches for the "Lost City of the Kalahari" persisted into the twentieth century. In recent women's literature, the same quest becomes the elaborate leitmotiv in Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence* (from 1966), for example.

⁴ Stockenström has said in conversation that this detail derives from seeing an exhibition about Mapungubwe, seat of a pre-Zimbabwean gold mining site complete with terraced circular structures, pottery and beadwork, discovered in the Northern Transvaal in 1933, and dating back a millennium. Certainly the actual setting of *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* falls within the boundaries of modern South Africa, and archaeologists have established that trade routes extended from here overland to Sofala (see especially Elkiss). Stockenström's interest in precolonial history is marked in her volumes of poetry, and dates from her trips in the 1970s to Angola, Mozambique, Reunion Island and Machu Picchu in Peru, where, it seems, evidence of precolonial cultures is less hidden. What reviewers really meant when they said she is known for her use of the "Africa" theme is that she wrote from a world larger than the circumscribed Afrikaner socio-polity of the early 1980s. See also the interview with Herber, 1979:144) in which Stockenström defined how she might have been influenced by Black writers.

become superfluous" (15); to the dying benefactor - "I let the invalid nestle between my drawn-up knees I whispered lewd stories I fed you with the death's milk of indifference ..." (20); to the baobab (30-1), and so on). Incantation is used, especially in the form of summoning-spells (to the bubbling stream (64-5)). Its corollary, cursing, is also used (17 and elsewhere).

More generally, language itself is used numinously and emblematically; the heroine is constantly creating things by naming them:

I say the name of the tree aloud, the name of water, of air, fire, wind, earth, moon, sun, and all mean what I call them. I say my own name aloud and my name means nothing. But still I am. (65)

Frequently, also, definitions are made by what they are not, as in an extraordinary paragraph all in the negative on p. 11.

The narrator specifically places these characteristics as part of a literary system which is an alternative to the male's "adventures stories" and "history" - "Let us tell each other fables rather than try to rend each other ..." (102). And part of the fabular narrative voice accommodates prophecy. In *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* there are many examples of this, of which the following is one of the most memorable:

The wind died down. In the unbelievable silence one of the big stones rolled down the cliff side, bouncing, leaping as if performing a trick, fantastic and soundless, and came to rest on the level below. Now I no longer heard anything. Suddenly I knew that if I were not to speak, something tremendous would happen. The dead would arise, or no, they would become visible to me, and time would somersault, the earth would tilt, capsize, and hang upside down in the direction of the limitless darkness and the spirit of the water would voyage into eternal space and forever be lost. (98)

Every time the prophetic voice emerges, it is apocalyptic, cosmically destructive; however, it is always subsequently undercut by adaptation and resignation. Shortly after the above the narrator concludes:

... I yielded to the powers of my environment, or, to put it less despondently, I learned to live with them, as I learned to live with the veld and the animals and insects, with the choice of paths in reality and in my sleep, and with the presence of people who kept me apart. It is a strange experience to share a life without contact

Conclusion

Reading *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* in the light of Stockenström's preoccupation with the functions of history and of narrative mode seems to release so much more of its meaning than the approaches used when the work first appeared. But the last - and most salient - point to make about the inadequate reception of the novella is one which one is surprised the feminists have not taken up: the work's real strength, its articulacy, its deep fascination seems to stem from a particularly moving bond of identification - that between a preliterate black slave woman and a white amanuensis at five centuries remove from her.

The bond is a personal one, between women. That Stockenström should have chosen the rare (very rare) form of the female slave narrative⁵ to embody this bond, and to explore it in her fiction, is to her very considerable credit as a writer of the future.

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⁵ Another, very similar, use of the female slave narrative is André Schwartz-Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude*, set in Guadeloupe, which Stockenström read when it first appeared in English in 1973. Research into female slave narratives has developed considerably since the publication of the *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, however; see, for example, Moira Ferguson's edition of the *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, originally edited by Thomas Pringle in 1830 (London: Pandora, 1987).