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Marlene van Niekerk. *Triomf*. Cape Town: Queillerie, 1994. Pp. 455. R59.95.

Afrikaans literature has been conducting its own truth commission in the past years with texts like Jeanne Goosen's *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990), John Miles's *Kroniek uit die doofpot* (1991), Mark Behr's *Die reuk van appels* (1993) and Pierre de Vos's *Slegs Blankes/Whites Only* (1993). These texts chart and expose events during the apartheid years, writing the history of the Afrikaner psyche in the process. Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* (winner of both the M-Net and CNA Literary Prizes in 1995) can be read as another addition to this new tradition in Afrikaans literature because it focusses uncompromisingly on a dark underside of South African society. Published in June 1994, *Triomf* was one of the first Afrikaans novels to be published after the first democratic election in South Africa that took place on the 27 April 1994 and one of the first to incorporate references to the election in the narrative. The novel recounts the monotonous daily lives of a family of poor white Afrikaners, showing how apartheid failed even those it was ideologically designed to benefit. They live in the Johannesburg suburb ironically called Triomf (Afrikaans for triumph), built on the ruins of the black township Sophiatown that was demolished in the 1950s by the social engineers of apartheid to create a suburb for the white working class. Their suburban yard can almost be called an "archaeological site" from which they dig up all sorts of remnants from the past, reminding them of the forced removals of blacks from Sophiatown which they witnessed from a safe distance as future inhabitants of the area.

The novel gradually reveals that the Benade family living in Triomf is a gross caricature of the nuclear family and all the values it embodies: the "husband" Pop, his "wife" Mol and their "relative" Treppie are actually siblings, while the epileptic Lambert is their son. (It is not clear whether Pop or Treppie fathered him.) Treppie's scheme to establish a refrigerator repair business having failed and Lambert not being able to finish school or hold down a job, they depend on welfare

pensions and Treppie's meagre income from an unspecified part-time job for their livelihood. The suspense in the novel comes from the buildup towards Lambert's fortieth birthday as well as the election, while the reader also waits for the unsuspecting Lambert to find out the truth about the family he is part of. Lambert tries desperately to get himself and his den in order for the "girl" Treppie and Pop promised him as a birthday present, hoping that she will agree to stay permanently. Apart from this, the family is constantly reminded of the coming election by the visits of the young Afrikaans couple who try to recruit their votes for the Nationalist Party although they clearly despise the Benades for their backwardness. Reflecting reactionary white fears of anarchy and black revenge, the family plan to escape to the North in their battered Volkswagen Beetle if "the shit hits the fan" after the election. The suspense finally culminates in Lambert's birthday which is also the day of the election. The birthday celebration goes seriously wrong when the prostitute Treppie and Pop hire Lambert as a birthday present turns out to be a business-like coloured girl, who is less than willing to comply with his schemes. The 27th of April also turns out to be the day on which Lambert finally finds out the truth about his incestuous family and goes on the usual violent rampage to vent his anger. In the process, Pop dies (whether of a heart attack or a multiple skull fracture accidentally inflicted by Lambert remains unclear), Treppie's fingers are all deliberately broken, Mol is stabbed in the side, and Lambert breaks his ankle against the garden wall. The end of the novel depicts the remaining members of the family still caught in the same circumstances as before, if possible even worse off. The final moments of the novel show them on Guy Fawkes, more than six months after the eventful election day, looking at the constellation of Orion over the roofs of Triomf without a north they can escape to ("noordeloos" as the Afrikaans text puts it).

Under its realistic surface the novel is richly symbolic. On the political level, the incestuous and inbred Benade family can be read as symbolic of the excesses to which the ideology of apartheid led. Their father voted for the National Party in 1948 because of a "family instinct" which dictated that they did not need anyone and that they should keep to themselves because they were better than those around them. The novel also discloses the historic and social specifics that led to the wretched condition of this family by recounting the political, economic, and social conditions from which they emerged: ancestors forced off their land during a depression to become impoverished workers in the railways and garment industry in the city; poor living conditions and a patriarchal system that led to family violence and abuse; the incestuous sexual games that had to suppress the hunger and isolation of the children Treppie, Pop, and Mol; their father's suicide and their mother's death of tuberculosis. This family history leads to a situation in which anyone outside the family is regarded with

the utmost suspicion, prejudice, and contempt (as manifested in their crude racism towards blacks and their disgust with the "dykes" who live across the road). Although the novel is not exclusively occupied with gender issues it demonstrates more eloquently than any feminist treatise could the position of women in such conditions. The objectification of Mol, sister of Pop and Treppie and mother of their child Lambert, reaches atrocious depths. She suffers emotional, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse especially at the hands of her brother Treppie and son Lambert. She is the sexual tool of all three men, and her status as a (sex) object is underlined by the fact that their battered car is also called Mol. Racially she is part of the group in South African society who considered themselves superior to blacks (her position is symbolic of the failure of the ideology of white supremacy); she is of a class looked down upon by other whites and Afrikaners (as is evident from the reaction of the young Afrikaans couple who try to recruit their votes for the Nationalist Party) and she is of the gender oppressed by the patriarchal system prevalent in the race and class configuration in which she finds herself. The novel also confronts the reader with the symbolic perversion of several religious principles. Pop, Treppie, and Mol form a perverted trinity that can be related to several creation myths while Lambert is ironically cast in the role of the virginal Lamb because he has never slept with anyone but his mother. His apprenticeship as refrigerator technician becomes an elaborate fridge-catechism led by Treppie who is mostly allotted the role of a vicious Mephistopheles and often referred to as a "devil" by the other members of the family. Treppie also fulfils the role of a perverted Christ and at times his violent harangues ironically resemble Christ's sermons on the mount. The novel also drives the idea of the Freudian family romance to grotesque extremes, culminating in the oedipal "killing" of Pop.

The novel's symbolic reach is amplified by its references to different traditions, cultures, literatures, and specific texts. *Triomf* is firmly embedded in the tradition of social realism in the early Afrikaans novel and recent Afrikaans theatre, often featuring socially deprived characters caught in the process of urbanization. As "urban nightmare," this novel constitutes a cynical response to its predecessors that often addressed the social problems portrayed in the text by taking refuge in the solutions provided by some myth or ideology. The novel can also be intertextually related to a variety of texts outside Afrikaans literature. To name just two examples: in reading *Triomf* one is strongly reminded of Roddy Doyle's novels about the working class as well as Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector*.

The novel employs an almost carnivalesque variety of styles in telling the story of the Benade family. The narrative straddles the divide between high and popular literature because it weaves between melodrama, sentimentalism, black comedy, raw tragedy, absurd theatre,

social realism, philosophical insight, and political comment. The stylistic variety is accompanied by an almost Bakhtinian carnival of macabre situations that illustrate the grotesque comedy inherent in suburban life. A few examples from the novel will suffice to illustrate this point: Mol who is forced by Lambert to mow the lawn by the light of the moon; the manic merry-go-round around the house when the bees from the cellar of their house attack them; the fortnightly visits by the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nationalist Party; the Saturday night brawls with the neighbours that result from Lambert's voyeuristic escapades; the palimpsest of paintings in Lambert's den; Treppie conducting Lambert's Multiple Choice exam on refrigerator repairs in a clown's costume; Pop's death under the sheets of the Wonder Wall painters. Read against this background, it is understandable that Guy Fawkes plays such an important role in the Benade family's calendar, the climax being the catastrophic Guy Fawkes party that results in Lambert wrecking Treppie's refrigerator repair business.

Because the different chapters in the novel are alternately narrated from the perspective of each of the four members of the family, readers are forced into close proximity with the characters and cannot easily detach themselves from the horrific conditions portrayed in the novel. The text does not permit us to judge the wretched Benades from a safe distance but rather obliges us to empathize with them because of our intimate knowledge of their inner histories. The novel is narrated not only from the perspective of the four Benades but also in their specific voices and language, resulting in the use of a variety of Afrikaans that reaches an almost breathtaking crudity at times. Testifying to the unsettling power of the use of language in the novel, one reviewer described the Benades's sociolect as "copulative-scatological" while another called it a "libidinal explosion" of the Afrikaans language. The novel challenges the limits of good taste and decorum on all levels, compelling the reader to live closely with the depravity and immorality of the characters for the duration of the novel. Thus the reader is taken beyond the simplicity of a moral stance against them into considering complexities beyond the choices dictated by a clear moral divide.

Finally, the four Benades become some of the most unforgettable characters in Afrikaans literature: Mol, who silently endures the abuse of her family and finds her only joy in the dog Gerty; Pop, who watches the family's misery from afar as if through the eyes of a circus elephant and who provides the few moments of tenderness in the novel (buying the family takeout meals with money he wins in a scratch card competition, and having a bath with Mol); and Lambert with his unrealizable dreams of order and his maniacal fits of violence. Most unforgettable of them all, however, is Treppie, the demonic metaphysician of the family whose vicious comments on their miserable state indicates a devastating self-awareness. The city of Johannesburg as well as the fam-

ily's rundown suburban house also achieve the status of characters in this novel. Treppie's metaphors alternately depict the city as one big pit bull-terrier fight, an iron dinosaur eating itself, a car backfiring because its points are dirty or as endless as the heart of a human being.

In her paradoxical ability to evoke feelings of revulsion as well as compassion for the degenerate Benade-family, Marlene van Niekerk illustrates the intricate relationship between the past and the present that will have to be negotiated when writing the new South Africa. As is the case with many of her contemporaries, she has shown that she is a novelist with the ability and the willingness to confront creatively the past rather than simply eliminate it.

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