

CULTURAL REFERENCES AND TEXTUAL CONVENTIONS IN
MARK BEHR'S *THE SMELL OF APPLES*: COMPREHENSION
AND RE-CREATION

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RESUMEN

Mark Behr, autor del *The Smell of Apples* (1993), concentra una nueva generación de escritores en el panorama literario postapartheid de Sudáfrica. Estos escritores en una nación reconciliada aún en el limbo, refieren el cruento pasado para explorar y buscar respuestas y claves a la situación presente.

ABSTRACT

Mark Behr, the author of *The Smell of Apples* (1993), epitomises a new generation of writers in the post-apartheid literary landscape of South Africa. These writers, in a reconciled nation still in limbo, refer to the excruciating past to explore it and search for answers and keys to the present. Behr, an Afrikaner himself, has written a book in Afrikaans and he then rewrote (or translated) it into English in 1995. Behr has kept his exploration within the boundaries of what he knows best –his own culture. However, to what extent can one write about one's own culture in a non-native language? The author first chose to write in the vernacular that had been termed in English as "the language of the oppressor". For him Afrikaans is more than a means of communication, it is forever linked to the history of the Afrikaners in Africa. As such, it is not surprising that the vernacular is an integral part of the English edition of *The Smell of Apples* in which the author has purposely chosen to keep terms in

Afrikaans. Such cultural and linguistic hybridity poses various problems for the translator, which may explain, along with other problems –like the lack of support from publishers–, why the novel has not yet been translated into languages like French or Spanish.

Despite its immediate popularity and its positive reception when it was first published in 1995, *The Smell of Apples* seems to have become forgotten and so, to some, the choice of this novel as a field for research, may appear to be somewhat unusual. Not that South African literature has hitherto remained beyond the academic path. On the contrary, as can be seen from various studies on the state of literature in South Africa such as *Writing South Africa, Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, since the demise of apartheid, South African literature has caught the world's attention as never before,

Behr's novel was originally written in Afrikaans in 1993 and published in English in 1995. It soon became a best-seller in South Africa, received the approval of numerous literary authorities and was awarded, amongst other prizes, the prestigious CNA Literary Debut Award, the Eugène Marais Prize, and the Betty Trask Award for the best first novel published in England in 1995. It was also shortlisted for the 1996 Guardian Fiction Prize.

The reader of Behr's first novel is usually enthralled by its originality and depth. The prose, with its constant time-shift, is so different from what one usually experiences that it mesmerises its reader and haunts him long after the last page. Behr carries his prose into the complexity of the Afrikaner mentality and the dark abyss of the human mind with its weaknesses and contradictions.

In an interview in which she referred to the "social fracture" of her country, Nadine Gordimer explained that, "External forces enter the very 'breast and brain' of the artist determining the nature and state of art in South Africa" (White and Couzens 1984, 162). Taking this postulate as a starting point, it is clear that any attempt to study a novel like *The Smell of Apples* without considering its social, political, moral and historical context is bound to fail. The issue of history as perceived in *The Smell of*

Apples is for ever linked with the fluctuating events that occurred in the country whilst the novel was being born in the author's mind. *The Smell of Apples* reveals the "social fracture" and the beginnings of the ensuing metamorphosis of South Africa as witnessed through the eyes of an Afrikaner.

Mark Behr drafted his story at the beginning of the 1990s, at a time when his country was being swept and remoulded by tremendous change. After fifty years of white supremacy, the country was slowly and painfully moving towards democracy. In this reconciled nation still in limbo, Mark Behr epitomises a new generation of writers in the post-apartheid literary landscape of South Africa which is dappled with emotions ranging from innocence to guilt, from denial and rejection to acceptance, from confusion and perplexity to greater understanding. Frequently plagued by stark contradictions, these writers refer to the excruciating past in order to explore it and search for answers and keys to the present.

On probing into the past, and by keeping his exploration within the boundaries of what he knows best –his own culture– Mark Behr has created a novel about the Afrikaners which presents a bitter-sweet picture of what their life was like. Perhaps one of the most important and commendable aspects of his undertaking is Behr's refusal to disown his roots. His novel is neither an indictment of nor an apology for the Afrikaner life-style and mode of thought. In this respect, the choice of Afrikaans as the language of the original novel is revealing of the author's intention. He chose to write in the vernacular that had been termed, rather ironically, in British English as "the language of the oppressor" because this was the language he knew best, the language that had painted his childhood with the colours of a society steeped in prejudice. Though aware of the inhumanity of segregation, Mark Behr makes a distinction between the ideology and the idiom. He recognises that it is not in banishing Afrikaans literature that one can erase the errors of the past. Once the language of resistance to British imperialism, there is no reason why it should not once more become the language of liberty; liberty to recount openly what happened during the apartheid era. Behr accepts the mistakes of the past and wholeheartedly embraces the opportunity of using his mother tongue in an attempt to purge the sins of his forefathers.

The author presents his account through the story of a young boy's childhood in Cape Town in the year 1973. Marnus, the eleven-year-old narrator, chronicles the everyday events that happen to his apparently solid and secure Afrikaner family. This means, amongst other things, fishing and bathing with his father, Johan Erasmus, who is a General in the South African army, lovingly watching his mother, Leonore, dressing for a party, quarrelling with Ilse, his supercilious elder sister or riding bicycles with his best friend, Frikkie Delport. Superficially, the novel presents an ordinary image of white middle-class boyhood in white South Africa. But—as the saying goes—all that glitters is not gold and a visit in the summer of that year from Mr. Smith, a General from Chile, tragically marks a watershed in Marnus' formative years by revealing the hypocrisy and perversion that lurked behind his parents' apparently idyllic life. The double standards of Marnus's parents are symbolic of the double standards in which South African society was immersed.

With Marnus' story, Mark Behr goes beyond a mere contribution to the retrospection undertaken in the field of literature and politics. Interwoven with the voice of Marnus as the child is the mature yet disillusioned voice of the adult he has become. The year is 1988, the setting Angola. Marnus, aged twenty-six, is an officer in the South African army engaged in a guerrilla war against the communists. Whilst fighting against external forces, the young man desperately tries to come to terms with his life and aspirations. Or is it Behr trying to come to terms with his own life and aspirations? The character of Marnus may be Behr's response to his own "other" spirit. The hero and its creator are related to one another to the point that the former can arguably be viewed as the reflection of the latter. Although details of the author's life are sparse, Marnus' story is possibly partly autobiographical.

The study of the Afrikaner experience through the eyes of Marnus requires us to look back in time and discover the place in which the boy spent his early years. Behr's novel, despite its fictional framework, is accurately grounded in the South African reality in which the Afrikaners built up an ethnic group sharing one language, Afrikaans. As pointed out earlier, *The Smell of Apples* was first written in Afrikaans, a language long viewed as a mere provincial dialect and coined in a derogatory way as 'kitchen Dutch' by the English. Therefore, when it became an official language

along with English and Dutch in 1925, it was seen as a victory. It asserted the singularity of the community in relation to the other ethnic groups. Afrikaans is more than a means of communication, it is forever linked to the history of the Afrikaners in Africa and their own peculiar fight for recognition and survival in a rapidly changing and volatile world. As such, it is not surprising that the vernacular is an integral part of *The Smell of Apples*. In the 1995 English version of the novel, we are often reminded that Marnus and his family speak in Afrikaans except in front of visitors, “none of us notice Mr Smith in the doorway until Mum suddenly speaks in English” (34). Whereas English is the language used for social, external relations, Afrikaans is quite clearly the language of intimacy. For example, we notice that during a fishing party, Johan expresses his anger towards his son in Afrikaans, “Get yourself and that fish on to this beach, Marnus! *Hoor jy my?*” (95). Similarly, during the last dinner with Mr Smith, although the dialogue is in English, Leonore interrupts in Afrikaans to reprimand Marnus (154). This scene is echoed in Gordimer’s novel *The Conservationist*. When the De Beer’s family visits the hero, Mehring, the mother speaks in English with her guest but scolds her child in Afrikaans.

The Afrikaners use their vernacular as means of separating and deliberately isolating themselves from other whites, especially the “despised” English. The use of language as a social partition is evident even to the child Marnus, who observes that the visiting general rolls the ‘r’ of his name “like people who really speak Afrikaans, not like when an Englishman says it.” Moreover, the author has purposely chosen to keep terms in Afrikaans in the English version. It would be pointless to quote them all but two are significant in so far as they are related to the Afrikaners’ identity. The term *Voortrekker* (2, 46) refers to those who participated in the epic of the *Great Trek*. The term *Volk* (38, 70) meaning ‘people’ in Afrikaans refers to the Afrikaners as a unique entity. Twice, Behr has kept the word *volk* instead of ‘people’ or ‘folk’ in Johan’s discourse. This stresses Johan’s attachment to his roots: above all, Marnus’ father is Afrikaner before being South African. By the same token –and particularly if this novel is considered semi-autobiographical– this could be taken as an indication of Behr’s attachment to his own roots: he considered himself Afrikans before being South African.

Marnus' account of episodic incidents in his childhood (and especially of a week in December 1973) is interrupted fifteen times by passages in italics. Irrespective of whether the reader takes the events of the novel from the viewpoint of Marnus the narrator in times of childhood bliss and innocence or from the standpoint of Marnus the soldier immersed in the hideousness of war, these fifteen time-shifts provide an insight into what happens to the hero in due course. Marnus is in Southern Angola, "in the aftermath of thirteen years of war" (29). The events are said to occur around June 1988 (cf. Leonore's letter page 133). The moment described is decisive, for failure would mean death for all. The background of this story within the story is specific: the setting is the Southern Angolan bush, with one principal combatant who hovers between following orders or fleeing for personal survival. The span of action does not cover more than two or three days. It was in 1988, that the South Africans came to the realisation that their involvement in Angola was bound to fail. The challenge was no longer to win but to survive. Marnus and his corps try to escape from Cuban troops and find refuge on the western side of the border, outside Southern Angola.

The cultural and linguistic hybridity evident in the novel poses various problems for the translator who must not only be well informed about the history of South Africa, but also be able to read and understand two interwoven languages and two intertwining cultures.

Understanding style and technique is also essential for the literary translator. By nature of the limitations of this paper, our approach is neither linguistic nor stylistic, but presents a panorama, albeit superficial, of the boy's discourse. As any experienced translator knows, the understanding of the style and technique used in the original text is an inevitable step to be taken in the initial stages of the translation process. All the socio-cultural and linguistic aspects of the original discourse must also be contemplated. Failure to do so adequately always leads to a deficient target text.

Before starting his fictional work, any author must decide on the point or points of view from which his story will be told. This choice is crucial for it "fundamentally affects the way readers will respond emotionally and morally to the characters and their actions". (Lodge 1992, 26)

(The translator's role here is vital: he must be able to grasp both the explicit and implicit messages within the original text as he becomes the instrument by which an author influences the response of his readers in his translated work). The informality and naivety of Marnus' speech is the guarantee of his sincerity and authenticity and the necessary condition for the reader to accept and adhere to what he is told. It should be stressed that in recreating the childhood views and feelings of Marnus, Behr shows an extraordinary ability to empathise. He demonstrates considerable sensitivity and mastery when presenting a coherent unravelling of the plot through what might sometimes appear to be the disjointed discourse of an eleven-year-old child. He intertwines colloquial speech with the voice of a boy whose vision of the adult world bears a devastating truthfulness. The fun-loving and innocent Marnus spontaneously relates the week of the General's visit rather than delivering a carefully constructed and polished account. One idea flows into another and thus the story unfolds from one digression to the next. Informal as it may seem, such a style demands much calculated effort and painstaking thought on the part of the novelist. By the same token, the same calculated effort and thought processes must form part of the translator's task if he is to recreate Behr's work in its entirety.

According to a definition given by Lodge, *Skaz* is the term rhetoricians would use to define Marnus' account of his childhood experiences. This Russian word designates "a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word." (Lodge 1992, 18) These characteristics are easy enough to identify in *The Smell of Apples*. Firstly, the syntax is extremely simple. Most of the sentences are short and uncomplicated. If they happen to be longer, the various clauses are strung together as they seem to occur, or simply co-ordinated by "and", "but" and "then", thus often giving the impression of a mere chronological enumeration of facts. The most frequent "developed" structures are those which illustrate the relation of cause and effect hence the recurrence of terms such as "because" and "so". This relation is indeed the first and easiest step that a child can take towards more complex analyses.

Secondly, Marnus' lexicon, which could be considered typical of an eleven-year old boy who identifies with the language of his peers, is very

basic. His range of vocabulary varies from simplistic wording (e. g. thing, something, someone, somewhere, good, bad, big, poor, to do, to see, to say, to go, to look like, etc.) to familiar expressions (“she doesn’t care two hoots about...” (4), “the head girl business” (13), “very badly” (20), “too big for her boots” (66), “mum is so caught up with...” (104) and slang (“nob”, “floozy”, “to nab”, “naff”, “poofter”, etc.). Repetitions are numerous since elegant variation of vocabulary would run counter to the impression that Marnus addresses us spontaneously.

Thirdly, the text is riddled with a typically-childish phraseology such as “acting like she was”, “it felt like we were”, “such a big-to-do” etc. Marnus’ speech is not void of grammatical mistakes that children often make and which seem to dominate their discourse. Like all children, Marnus expresses the strength of his feelings by constantly exaggeration everything through the repeated use of superlatives: “my favourite story in the whole world” (36), “the nicest thing in the whole world” (73), “the most dreadful of dreadful disgrace” (45), “the most terrible of terrible things” (87), “the thing I’m most frightened of in the whole world” (103), “the most dreadful of dreadful things” (131).

The translator of Mark Behr’s novel has to take all types of linguistic elements and devices as well as the social, cultural, political and moral climate of the time into account if he is to make his translation as communicative and semantically faithful to the original as possible: it is his duty to produce the same effect on the reader of the translation as that made on the reader of the original text. Then, and only then, can he try to render the exact contextual meaning of the original, within the limits allowed by the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language.

Perhaps the notion of “social fracture”, which so poignantly sums up Nadine Gordimer’s assessment of the nature and state of art in South Africa should be carried over and applied to the *Smell of Apples* and its translation. Being a literary piece heavily steeped in its own social, political, cultural and moral beliefs, it automatically bears the scars of social fracture. If an inadequate translation of the novel is offered, this fracture would become complete. By his very nature and circumstances, Mark Behr is the ideal translator (into English) to avoid this fracture. By applying his bilingual and bicultural experiences, he has successfully bound together

the splinters - although repetition of the technique of using original terms and then offering explanations of them may be considered by some purists as a continual side-stepping of the act of translation. Whether this is true or not, Behr has achieved his objective: *The Smell of Apples* not only lingers in the minds of his Afrikans readers, but its bitter-sweet aroma also impregnates the consciousness of native English speakers. Perhaps the difficulty of transporting this markedly cultural scent into other languages explains why Behr's novel has yet not been translated into languages like Spanish or French.

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