

The influence of Goethe's *Faust* on N.P. van Wyk Louw's drama *Die dieper reg*

This article is based on a doctoral thesis entitled "Die invloed van Duitse literatuur op die werk van N.P. van Wyk Louw" which was undertaken at the University of Johannesburg.

A B S T R A C T Owing to his studies of German and extensive reading in the field of German literature, the Afrikaans poet and playwright N.P. van Wyk Louw had been acquainted with Goethe's *Faust* when he wrote his first published drama *Die dieper reg* in 1938. The section entitled "Prolog im Himmel" and the character of Mephistopheles were of special interest to him, although he vehemently denied his indebtedness to the latter. This article explores to what extent Louw's drama was influenced by Goethe's *Faust* and also investigates his conception of the "deed", which is in accordance with the striving character of *Faust*.

Keywords: Influence; German literature; N.P. van Wyk Louw

1. Introduction

1.1 N.P. van Wyk Louw and German Literature

Long after N.P. van Wyk Louw had established himself as the undisputed doyen of Afrikaans literature, he was requested to write an introduction to the printed catalogue for an exhibition of German books in 1963. In the piece called "Spruit en rivier", he expressed his deeply felt regret for not being able to stay in constant contact with the latest German literature (*Versamelde prosa* 2, 1986:540). Although, superficially, this may seem to be only a polite remark by Louw, it is actually an indication of a very special affinity with a literature which had an immense impact on him, especially in his early phase as a poet.

Louw first came into formal contact with German language and literature when he was a young student at the University of Cape Town in 1924. Even though D. J. Opperman states that it was

Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* that prepared Louw for German influences, Nietzsche and national-socialism (1953:167), his initial interest may also have been stirred by the mere fact that a demand existed for teachers who could teach German (Steyn, 1998:50). When enrolling for a degree in education, he decided to include German in his curriculum. Louw himself, however, declared that the most important impetus for getting to know more about German was the fact that the name of Goethe appeared throughout English and Dutch literature (*Versamelde prosa 2*, 1986:539), both of which he was acquainted with owing to the status of these two languages as the official languages in South Africa at the time. For an avid young reader, hungry to explore the written word outside the national context, this was without a doubt a possibility worth investigating.

Louw's desire for knowledge of German culminated in a master's degree in German in 1926, followed by a short stint of teaching German at a school in Steynsburg, in the Karoo. He became so engrossed that he even included translations of Hölderlin-poems and his favourite passages from Nietzsche in letters to his wife, Truida. In addition, a growing fascination with German philosophy, as well as a short-lived enthusiasm for the Nazi ideology, provided the stimulus for many of his earlier essays and literary productions, leading to fierce criticism that has endured even to the present day.

Louw's exposure to German literature inevitably resulted in the interaction of texts and the interpollinating of ideas. From his earliest published poems before *Alleenspraak* (1935), through his first collection of verse, and up to his magnum opus *Tristia* (1962), German influence can be perceived in varying degrees of intensity. His stage dramas, from the early youth work *Konrad, prins van Elsass* (1924), and his radio dramas, almost all display the imprint of German precursors. Fascinated by the lyrical quality of Heinrich Heine, the poetic suppleness of Rilke, the vitality and spiritual heroism of Stefan George, the aristocratic ideal and will to power of Nietzsche, and the artistic virtuosity of Goethe, amongst others, Louw intended to create a literature which could not only rank amongst the great, but also compete with them – an ideal that coincided with his ambitions for Afrikaner nationalism. But it was not only poetic techniques or ideas that Louw included in his oeuvre; some of his works show remarkable similarities with German literary works in terms of structure, themes and images.

This enterprise provoked many detractors. Louw was frequently criticised for "intellectualising" Afrikaans literature by following European (read German) examples in a wide variety of literary activities ranging from the creation of simple folk songs set in a local context to the complexities of incorporating ideology in literature and developing Afrikaans literary criticism. However, he strongly insisted on linking up with other modern literatures, for in his opinion this would not only save South African literature from a "colonial mentality" (*Versamelde prosa 1*, 1986:526), but also reinforce the European roots of Afrikaans. Judged from this point of view, Louw's stance on influence as a literary phenomenon could only be positive, and that was indeed the case initially.

1.2 Louw's view on influence

In an introduction to a collection of prose and poetry by the Dutch poet A. Roland Holst, which Louw was requested to write in March 1943, he declared:

1. Om goeie poësie in "navolging" van 'n digter in 'n mens se eie taal te skryf, vereis minstens groot talent;
2. Om goeie literatuur in "navolging" van 'n digter in 'n ander

taal te skryf, vereis byna genie; 3. Om groot poësie in "navolging" of sonder navolging van 'n digter in enige taal (eie of vreemde) te skryf, vereis genie *sans phrase*. Die enigste kritiese vraag wat sin het, is dit: is die gedig/poësie in hierdie taal en soos hy hom aanbied, slegte, goeie of groot poësie? As dit groot is, is dit die laaste wat die kritiek as insig-in-die-literatuur kan sê (Steyn, 1998:452).

Continually referring to "navolging" in a positive vein – which could be read here as "influence", but which could also easily be misunderstood as mere emulation or epigonism – Louw endorses the use one poet makes of the work of another. In the following years he would write extensively on the issue of originality and poetic influence, and constantly maintain that influence has positive consequences when it is assimilated, processed and revised at a necessary distance from the original source. With the vivid image of literature as a "web" – indicating that wherever it is touched, the whole of it stirs (*Versamelde prosa* 1, 1986:394) – he expands his view by emphasizing the interdependence and interconnectedness of texts as the underlying discursive relation between them.

Eventually exhausted by the so-called "invloede-jagtery" (hunting for influence) in his own work, Louw became averse towards the phenomenon of poetic influence in later years and changed his views radically. Critics who neglect to take the contribution of the artist into consideration annoyed him to such an extent that he strongly denied any influence on his work (Steyn, 1998:1030). The poem "Ars poetica" in *Tristia* became the proclamation of his new view that no new literature could be formed from already existing literature, and draws the final line under the possibility of influence:

Uit die gevormde literatuur
is nooit weer poësie te maak nie,
uit die ongevormde wél:
heuning uit blomsap
– om te illustreer –
en uit heuning self, glo nog;
maar nie meer uit die seshoek sel.
(*Versamelde gedigte*, 2002:251).

The change in Louw's perception is quite understandable, but it is also a bit surprising in regard to its nature. To sever contact between already existing, or "formed" literature, and "new" literature is impossible because it forms part of the poet's range of experience, and eventually also part of the "web". The true poet can never be distanced from the great poetry of the world, for it is the starting-point from which a clear turning-point must be reached, for the emergence of an original "own" voice of substance. This is apparent, amongst many other instances in Louw's work, in the case of the influence of Goethe's *Faust* on Louw's *Die dieper reg*, the drama that is the focus of this essay.

2. The influence of Goethe's *Faust* on *Die dieper reg*

At the request of the Afrikaans Culture Council, N.P. van Wyk Louw was commissioned to write a short dramatic piece for the celebration of the centennial of the Great Trek in 1938. Enthused by a national calling and a firm belief in the future of the Afrikaner, he honoured this commission

by producing *Die dieper reg*, 'n spel van die oordeel oor 'n volk (1938), which was published fourteen years after his first, juvenile drama *Konrad, Prins van Elsass* (1924). Whereas *Konrad* focussed on the trials and tribulations of the individual, *Die dieper reg* had a nation as a whole as the protagonist, namely the young Afrikaner nation represented by the Trekkers.

For his genre, Louw chose the so-called "digterlike koorspel", or poetic chorus. Despite the fact that the occasion already determined the outcome of the play, Louw approached it from an unconventional point of view. Instead of merely presenting historical events, he offered a 'concealed' piece of work (Van Rensburg, 1975b:114) based on questioning the essential issue of the right of the Afrikaner to exist. This theme had already been touched upon in Louw's dramatic-lyrical "Gedagtes, liedere en gebede van 'n soldaat" in *Die halwe kring* (1937), where the scope of artistic adaptation ranges from stirring revenge provoked by the wounded on the battlefields during the Anglo-Boer War, to praising the pure will as the means for enabling a spiritual rebellion against suppression as well as protecting the spiritual values of the Afrikaner nation. The same theme would continue to interest Louw intensely until the early 1940s, which is roughly considered to be the end of the first phase of his poetic career.

Similar ideas on nationalism and the existence of a nation are also expressed in his essayistic works, for example "Die ewige trek", published in October 1938 and included the following year in the collection *Lojale verset*. In that essay Louw proposes that the existence of a young nation in a world of power movements is determined by its *own will* to be a nation: a will to resist an attack from the outside in such a way that a stronger country will not benefit by conquering it (Versamelde prosa 1, 1986:95). The course of history and the future of a nation is in the end dependent on the powerful struggle of the will of countless individuals ("enkellinge") combined with rational intellectual reflection and energetic activity (Ibid., 102). Another essay entitled "Kultuur en krisis", published in August 1952 and later included in the collection *Liberale nasionalisme* (1958), also refers to this issue: Louw warns against the seduction to believe that mere existence is preferable to existence in justice, for it is justice alone that forms the basis of the existence of the Afrikaner – a thought that is the central focus of *Die dieper reg*.

The drama is set in the Hall of Eternal Justice ("Saal van Ewige Geregtigheid") where all generations of men eventually proceed to be judged according to their deeds (1942:9). The Trekkers, represented by a man, woman and child, appear together with their interceder before the Choir of Heavenly Bodies ("Koor van Hemelse Figure"), after which the interceder and the prosecutor join issue, the latter to contest the deeds of the Trekkers. In the end, the Trekkers plead their cause on the grounds of the deed itself, professing their faith in the worth of their blood; they also suspect that the consciousness of their "blood" is the expression of the Will of God (Ibid.). Following the different pleas, the Voice of Justice ("Stem van Geregtigheid") pronounces its verdict, and the Trekkers are acquitted. They receive this acquittal because their simple deeds were driven by a pure will. In its own turn, pure will is equated to the fulfilment of God's Will. The Voice Of Justice declares:

Gaan heen en weet dat julle reg
en daad voor God kan staan
omdat dit krag en eenvoud was,
omdat Hy self eenvoudig is:

één suiwer Wil, één ewige Daad
en bokant alle wisseling vas (Ibid.).

When writing this drama, Louw can confidently be assumed to have been acquainted with Goethe's *Faust* in consequence of his studies of German, as well as his extensive reading and teaching in this field. Significantly, Goethe's collected works also feature in Louw's personal library. In this regard, Pakendorf cites *Die dieper reg* to show that Louw's early work was not only inspired, but also strongly influenced by the German literary and philosophical tradition. He writes that the main theme of Louw's drama – that "die mens wat voor God soos in 'n verhoor verantwoording moet doen, en die daarmee gepaardgaande daad 'wat rein streef' waardeur die mens verlos word" (1990:39) – also figures as one of the central themes of Goethe's *Faust*, which Louw apparently took over and adopted. This claim certainly has some merit. As will be seen, Goethe's influence is not only related to the central idea of Louw's play but extends to a few other elements as well.

The following similarities and differences between the two works are of interest: whereas the larger part of the action in the complete *Faust*-drama is set on earth, *Die dieper reg* is set entirely on a divine plane. The relation between Louw's dramatic setting and the section in the first part of Goethe's *Faust* entitled "Prolog im Himmel" cannot be denied. For Goethe, the prologue provided the framework within which the whole of the *Faust* tragedy is to take place before it ends in the second part in a corresponding way in the presence of angels, a Heavenly Host and the *Chorus Mysticus*. In the case of Louw's drama, Goethe's Heaven becomes the Hall of Eternal Justice where the Trekkers go to make their plea before the final judgement is passed. If Heaven in *Faust* is a place *outside* the drama where the dramatic action in the end will be executed, it is the *milieu* of *Die dieper reg* where all the dramatic action comes to pass.

In the tradition of the Greek tragedians, both Goethe and Louw make use of a chorus to elucidate and judge the deeds of their protagonists. This is the only structural similarity between the two dramas. In *Die dieper reg*, the Choir of Heavenly Bodies ("Koor van Hemelse Figure") consists of the First Half Choir ("Eerste Halwe Koor") and the Second Half Choir ("Tweede Halwe Koor") performing alternately, but also jointly, as the Choir ("Koor") that praises "die donker lot van die aarde en die heiligheid en onbegryplikheid van die Reg" (1942:2). There is also the Choir of Trekkers that illuminates and supports the case of the Trekkers. At the end of the play all the choir voices are heard in unison ("Alle Stemme Op Verhoog Saam") which has a uniting function: the endorsement of the idea that God is present in the pure deed, as well as the presentation of the deeds of the Trekkers as not only just, but as *justified*.

Goethe's prologue also features a Heavenly Host, from which the three archangels Raphael, Michael and Gabriel emerge to praise God, the order of the Creation based on the interaction between contrary forces, as well as the Creation as a whole: "Der Anblick gibt den Engeln Stärke / Da keiner dich ergründen mag, / Und alle deine hohen Werke / Sind herrlich wie am ersten Tag" (1999:26). Although the archangels praise the exaltedness of God, and thereby already determine the outcome of the wager at the expense of Mephistopheles, the choric element as such is not evident. It is only in the first scene of the first part of the drama itself that the choir is utilized in its true form. Thereafter it continually features in the action and eventually culminates in the "Bergschluchten" scene of *Faust II* with the Mystical Choir of Heaven.

Here, the pronouncement of the *Chorus Mysticus* has a uniting function in bringing the message home that the dying will always be drawn towards the Divine: precisely the same message as is found in *Die dieper reg*.

A very intriguing similarity exists between the characters of Mephistopheles in *Faust* and the Prosecutor in *Die dieper reg*. On the surface, this comparison may seem to be far-fetched, especially when the reader's attention is specifically directed towards the following statement in the preamble ("Inhoud") of Louw's play:

Die Aanklaer, *geen duiwelse figuur van die oorlewing nie*, maar 'n magtige en hooghartige Gees wat koninklik in sy eie reg staan, *ontken* die waarde van hul dade en *eis dat hulle aan hom tot vernietiging oorgelewer word* (1942:9) [italics – HC].

It seems likely that Louw's Prosecutor is an original creation, but actually this character is – even though Louw denies it – similar to Goethe's Mephistopheles: the denying Spirit ("der Geist, der stets verneint"). Unlike the archangels who praise the Creation, Mephistopheles stands before God to complain about man (or rather to accuse as a prosecutor does). He sees only the way in which human beings, as the "small gods of the world", constantly trouble and reprimand each other because they have received the glow of heavenly light from God (i.e. reason), compelling them to become more bestial than animals: "Er nennt's Vernunft und braucht's allein, / Nur tierischer als jedes Tier zu sein" (1999:26).

Louw's Prosecutor for his part states that in addition to lawlessness and an independent mind (which can be read as will resulting from intellect), the Trekkers were also driven to their deeds by hunger and fear ("hongerte en vrees, / lei met mooi woorde die verstand" [1942:20]). According to him, their courage should be interpreted as nothing but an urge displayed by animals ("dapperheid [is] niks as drif wat selfs die diere het" [Ibid., 22]). Just as Faust reveals to Mephistopheles his hunger to be elevated above the limitations set to man, the Trekkers appear to the Prosecutor to be hungry for land ("grondhonger"):

in opstand het hul uitgegaan
die bande en die wet verbreek,
en dwaas hul in verderf gestort
om grond te roof en ryk te word – (Ibid., 19).

In essence, the Trekkers also display a hunger, or drive, to cross the boundaries set to them by the law. In the end, the different driving forces underpinning both Faust's and the Trekkers' actions allow them to be justified – but these driving forces are grounds for possible punishment too. Despite the outcome, Mephistopheles is able to validate his wager with God and Faust respectively, consequently requesting Faust to be delivered to him, and the Prosecutor's appeal to Divine Justice that the Trekkers should be punished is also legitimate:

AANKLAER (tree na vore)
Ek eis van U Geregtigheid,
wat ewig en flikkerloos
brand, o God, vaster
as die verganklike sterre en stelsels:
gee hul aan my

dat ek hulle slinger
af langs die vergetelheid,
die donker steiltes, waar hul
– verdwyn en vernietig –
minder sal wees
as die ongeborenes (Ibid., 27)

and

MEPHISTOPHELES

Wenn ich zu meinem Zweck gelange,
Erlaubt ihr mir Triumph aus voller Brust.
Staub soll er [Faust] fressen, und mit Lust,
Wie meine Muhme, die berühmte Schlange (1999:28).

The Prosecutor stands as a proud and haughty spirit in his own right, but he is still subject to the Voice of Justice ("Stem van Geregtigheid") and to God. In the same way, the captious and witty Mephistopheles, the arch-seducer, finds himself in the service of God, because "*der Mensch [kann] nur durch den Teufel zu Gott gelangen*" (Von Wiese, 1967:133). Faust has to be seduced by Mephistopheles – in line with the Job tradition – before he can experience the divine grace of God.

Louw's denial of the similarity of his Prosecutor with the so-called "devilish figure of tradition" is not completely justified. Even though the Prosecutor might not be that strange, evil character with goat's hooves and the two black crows as companions, he is still the devil's advocate. And the fact remains that if the Trekkers had not received the grace and the mercy of God, they would still have been hurled down into Hell by the Prosecutor. The question that arises now is whether Louw's denial should not be read as a preconceived effort to gloss over Goethe's influence. If so, it does not fit with Louw's view at the time of writing *Die dieper reg* that the so-called "navolging" of another poet should be viewed positively (see e.g. Steyn, 1998:452). In fact, this denial carries the seed of the perception that he held in later years, that it is not possible for new literature to be made from already "formed" literature. The more likely reason for Louw's denial is that he did not want his audience to "understand" or "read" the character of the Prosecutor as a Mephistopheles-type figure, since it would open a new possibility of interpretation which he did not want to associate with this figure, namely that the Prosecutor complains rather than accuses.

3. The concept of the "deed" ("daad")

One of the most important ideas that Louw derived from Goethe is his concept of the "deed". Although both were men of the active deed, Louw shows more similarities with the younger Goethe of the *Urfaust* during the *Sturm und Drang* period than with the older and wiser Goethe of *Faust*.

When Faust decides to translate the Gospel according to John into his native German, there exists only one possible opening thought: "im Anfang war die *Tat!*" (1999:61), or "In the beginning was the *Deed!*". This is, of course, a deviation from the more familiar notion that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Faust

is a man of the deed; he is the individualistic Übermensch who, with an overpowering life force and inspired by nature, denies the rules of society, science and morality. But he is also a sacrilege:

Faust ist nicht nur der Frevler an der Gesellschaft, sondern überdies, womit er noch hoch hinauswächst über die meisten andern Gestalten der Sturm-und-Drang-Dichtung, [...] ein Frevler gegen Gott, der sein Übermenschentum mit einem Teufelsbündnis krönt und [...] gewissermaßen auch ein Ausnahmerecht für sich in Anspruch nimmt (Korff, 1966:279).

As a young student in Leipzig and Strasbourg, when Goethe was already working on his *Urfaust*, he was himself enveloped in a religious crisis because the doctrine of his time did not acknowledge nature as part of the revelation of God. As a result of this crisis, his world-view became one of irrational-vitalistic pantheism: God is absolute, He is an all-encompassing cosmic power represented in the whole universe, and it is only the active and always striving human being who can be brought to self-realization through God's grace.

In *Faust*, God's trust in Faust, His handiwork, His image, is complete. In the utmost conviction of triumph, God does not hesitate for one moment to subject His servant to a pact with the devil, because inherently he knows the true path: "Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunkeln Drange / Ist sich des rechten Weges wohl bewußt" (1999:28). When man, however, consciously lifts himself from his "natural" striving mode as Faust does, he becomes guilty. Longing to be more than is ordained for one, and trying to procure insight into God's work, is a sin. But there is hope: Faust's salvation inevitably lies in the fact that he always remains striving despite his diversion from the true path.

Against this imposing backdrop, Louw's conception of the "deed" is somewhat immature. Still captive to the energetic activeness of the young prince of Elsass (*Konrad*) and the idea of "le sentiment est plus que la raison" (Rousseau), Louw wants to promote the importance of the simple deed inspired by a pure will. For him, it is through the deed alone – in other words, without considering social and ethical measures – that freedom and salvation are possible. Encapsulated in this deed is also the Will of God. Therefore the acquittal is just and the deeds of the Trekkers are justified. This idea is derived from Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886) in which the notion that the intentions underlying the deed serve as basis for judgement, is rejected. For Nietzsche, as well as for Louw, the most important factor is not the individual or his intentions, but his will and actions, because his character is recognised thereby. In this context, Nietzsche writes in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887): "es gibt kein 'Sein' hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; 'der Thäter' ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet, – das Thun ist Alles" (1968:293). The deed alone is thus the key to existence.

This perception of the deed, however, is problematic. Both Olivier (1998) and Renders (2002) observe an individualism that fails to appreciate the results of the Trekkers' deeds in the historical context. It also produces the possibility that every single deed, despite its results, is justified; in other words, the deed creates its own justification (Olivier, 1998:622). Additionally, notions like these come uncomfortably close to fascism. Even more worrying is that Louw combines his conception of the deed with the concept of "bloedsbesel" ("blood consciousness") – terminology with extremely negative connotations considering the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the Second World War in the name of racial purification. In defence of Louw, Van Rensburg

posits that the basis of the acquittal in *Die dieper reg* is not the mere *deed* and will, but rather the *pure* deed and will (1975a:215). In my opinion, however, it is precisely from the word "pure" that the problem arises. It seems to me that Louw, like Nietzsche, understands the deed as such as pure and flawless. This implies that the "mere" deed is also the "pure" deed, which nullifies Van Rensburg's distinction. Whether one chooses to consider the consequences of the deeds performed by the Trekkers or not, or attempts to analyse the deed itself, the fact remains that the reason for the Trekkers' acquittal is presented very vaguely and is not convincing at all.¹

It is certain that the deed is a focal point in both dramas despite the difference of maturity in the perceptions of the two dramatists. The question, though, is whether Faust's salvation is due to his deeds alone, as it is the case in *Die dieper reg* where the Trekkers are judged on their deeds, and are acquitted because the Will of God is manifested in their deeds. Although Faust's deeds are tainted by the devil's constant interference, they are in the end focussed on the well-being of society at large and therefore indicative of the fact that the striving human being will obtain the mercy of God as predicted by Him in the "Prolog im Himmel". But it is the intercession of the Eternal Female, embodied by Gretchen, that in the end turns the scales in Faust's favour. Her intercession is based on the power of female love, heavenly as well as earthly, because the

religiöse Kraft, die die weibliche Liebe dort besitzt, wo sie ganz rein und ganz makellos da ist und sich hingibt, das ist für Goethe der einzige Weg, die Tragik des Mannes Faust aufzuheben, während er sonst unrettbar der Gespaltenheit und dem unerlösten Widerspruch seiner zwei Seelen preisgegeben bliebe (Von Wiese, 1967:144).

In other words, without this pure, flawless and sacrificial love, this utmost devotion, Faust would have been eternally lost. The deed in itself, however, does not serve as the sole means to salvation, as it does in Louw's drama.

4. Conclusion

A comparison between a drama written for a specific political purpose and a literary colossus such as *Faust* is not necessarily to the advantage of the former, especially in terms of its quality and worth. Judging by the level of the deposition of Goethe's influence on Louw in this case, one can hardly argue that *Faust* was indispensable to the conception of *Die dieper reg*. The fact remains, however, that certain elements were indeed adopted and incorporated from the German source, providing a discursive framework for the two texts and an interrelation between them.

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¹ See also Truter's article "Geregtigheid en *Die dieper reg*" published February 1961 in *Standpunte*, reissued in Nienaber, P. J. (ed.) *Beeld van 'n Digter: N.P. van Wyk Louw* (1966).

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