

Adam Small (1936-2016)



There was a hush at the beginning of the second semester of 1985 when the Rector congratulated the Head of the Department of Social Work on his promotion to Professor and on becoming a permanent member of the Senate of the University of the Western Cape.¹ The new Professor, slim in stature, dapper in appearance with a shock of greying hair, got up, bowed like an Buddhist monk and mouthed the words: "Thank you, Rector, dankie vir u vriendelike woorde".

Thank you, for your friendly words.

Those in the know recognised that moment as one of homecoming. Usually, the university's highest academic body bore an air of reserve and seriousness. The assembled Deans of Faculty, Heads of Department and the Professors were not prone to effusive demonstrations of emotion, mostly because of the hellish humdrum of the recurring administration of rules, regulations and stipulations.

A few weeks earlier, the Rector submitted the candidate's curriculum vitae to the Senior Appointments Committee. It was no ordinary professorial curriculum vitae. The candidate had no PhD in Social Work, but gained a MA in Philosophy and he had years of practical experience as a qualified social worker; he had few, if any, formal Social Work research publications but he had produced numerous poetical, dramatic and essayistic publications; he wrote and commented conscientiously on matters of the day in popular journals and newspapers. He was an unassailable public intellectual.

Among the members of the SAC none questioned his practical experience or the appropriateness of his promotion. Adam Small's candidature passed without much debate. Two years earlier, on Small's appointment as a senior lecturer in Social Work, the Rector reputedly said to one of his colleagues, "I'd rather appoint an intellectual than an unthinking manager". On this occasion he might well have said: "Today, we have righted an old wrong".

In 1973 Small, although the then Head of the Department of Philosophy, was not allowed to be a member of Senate, because he was not white. The university, created as an institution for Coloureds under the precepts of apartheid in 1959, had its most

serious existential crisis in June 1973 when protesting students were suspended and locked out. Small, “the most eloquent spokesman during the crisis”, told his students that their discontent was “a reflection of black bitterness about the whole situation in the country”, “it was time to stand up and be counted” (Public Library, “Deadlock”; “Government”). As the only black member of staff, Small resigned in solidarity with the students, and “in a larger sense because a racial deadlock had been reached in South African society” (Public Library, “Deadlock”). Although the students urged him to stay on, the university administration accepted his resignation, effective from the beginning of 1974. Years of displacement followed and Small, the intellectual, retrained as a social worker to face the practicalities of urban South Africa.

Eleven, twelve years later the UWC was a different place. Prof Richard van der Ross was its first Coloured principal, a cohort of young black academics was appointed and its campus became a vibrant, anti-apartheid space. Small’s idea of a “Free University with a syllabus meaningful to blacks” (Public Library, “Government”) never formally came to fruition but the UWC was evolving into its antecedent. In the second semester of 1985 Prof Adam Small stood up in the Senate Chamber knowing that the 1970s generation of students, many of them, now his colleagues, appreciated his personal sacrifice and valued his enduring and persistent struggle for individual and societal freedom.

In public, Small spoke with charming tentativeness, as if weighing up every word, turning it inside out. He qualified virtually every clause with a subordinate clause, followed by still further subordinate clauses—the deep reverberations of his training as a philosopher where the notion of absolute truth simply did not exist. His student, and later his friend and colleague, Jakes Gerwel, many a time recounted the influence Small had on his development as a scholar, especially his belief in the importance of doubt and relativity, the subversion of rigidity, tyranny and absoluteness.

‘We must not remain voiceless’, Small seemed to insist as a young intellectual, and constantly commented on whatever public forums were available, be it in letters to newspapers, as a columnist, as a public speaker, as an academic and most pertinently as a creative writer. ‘Write so that you could be heard.’

As a public intellectual Small became the standard-bearer for the impoverished of the Cape Flats, a critical and impassioned voice that spoke for them, even though he had no claim to office like the politicians of the Coloured Persons Representative Council, or no appetite for the activism of the purist intelligentsia of the Unity Movement. As a concerned citizen and as a social worker he often intervened on behalf of the poor. According to Tina Choegoe it is due to Small’s efforts that her husband, the murderer Marthinus Choegoe, escaped the executioner’s noose in the mid-1970s (see Cleophas 31). Small spoke up against the depravity and horror of the destruction of migrants’ flimsy wooden and iron shanties and their eviction

in the midst of long, wet Cape winters. He wrote in the language of the poor. In his poetry and plays he wrote about their desperate plight in the desolate townships where they had made their lives. He recorded the demolition of District Six, the symbol of apartheid's destruction of black lives:

Ismail Moegamat Kassiem hy was hie in Distric' Ses
very much alive
however
toe hoor hy daa gan manne kô wat bulldozers kan drive²

Although Small closely identified with the Afrikaans language, and with his fellow Afrikaans speakers, the Afrikaners, he was the perennial outsider. In an unpublished poem "Trap der jeugd" written in 2013 he reminisces about the language, its poetry, his position as an outsider and his ultimate resolve that he is bound to his language, notwithstanding the "evil meanness" of apartheid:

As 'n klein kind nog, wis ek
Ek was Afrikaans in my hele wese,
[...]
Ek was deurgaans bewus
dat alles gruwelik moeilik sou wees
om, as bruin
op die kruin bo uit te kom
[...]
Ek het Apartheid gehaat
omdat dit my wou keer
om óp te klim, alles is vir jou
met bose gemeenheid bemoeilik.
[...]
Nou, ná jare en jare, veertig jaar,
eintlik 'n halwe eeu, het ek
vir myself die Lig gevind, en daardie
klein bruin kind se Wil vervul:
hom ingebind in Afrikaans vir altyd.³

Yet, amidst a political environment characterised by social and political insularity, the structural violence of apartheid, the violence of the organs of state and the violence of resistance Small resolutely advanced the notion of on-going dialogue, of keeping open the prospects of truthful discussion and deliberation: 'we must trust our collective intellect, constantly seeking contact and trying to understand each other', he said again and again over the years. In a public lecture in 1977 he said: "when you are committed to the intellect—to reason and its articulation in

public—[...] you speak to all people [...] you use every platform which is usable." True to his ingrained predisposition to dialogue he accepted the last National Party's leader, State President F. W. de Klerk's Order for Meritorious Service (Gold) in 1994 and awards from the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, an academic organisation that earlier actively excluded non-white Afrikaans speakers from their ranks. Such acts of *toenadering*, rapprochement, often raised questions of reconciliation, forgiveness and forgetting. Others, especially opponents on the political left, would regard such overtures with suspicion. Not Small. He said (in Fishlock): "I still harbour strong feeling[s] about apartheid. There is bitterness to overcome. The pain of rejection endures. [...] Many whites behave as if the slate has been wiped clean, as if apartheid had never been. [...] Forgiveness is a large concept. As for forgetting we should never forget."

Small was always intellectually curious, although for a period of almost ten years around the turn of the century he withdrew from the world around him, not commenting publicly on the state of the 'new South Africa', the extensive cultural and political changes that were under way or any of the topics that a younger Small would have fancied. His voice fell silent. The voice that re-emerged four, five years before his death bore the traces of past agonies but also relished with a sense of wonderment at the world around him. In one of his last columns in the newspaper, *Cape Times*, Small ("Knowing") wrote about the value of silence:

[T]he innermost core of silence remains our guide to how silence is to be suspended. [George] Steiner is right: only when silence is embraced is there true language, but, we must add, inclusive of all the other "speaking" constituents of language, music, mathematics, the crying of a baby, the cheering of the crowd at a sportsfield, the weeping at a funeral, the joyous laughter at a wedding...

Adam Small died on 25 June 2016 in Kingsbury Hospital, Claremont, Cape Town from complications following vein bypass surgery. He is survived by his second wife Rosalie and their children Peter and Zaidee, as well as two sons from his first marriage, John and Leopoldt.

Notes

1. I have published elsewhere two additional, complementary obituaries of Small, see Willemsse ("Adam Small") and Willemsse ("Die groot goed").
2. A free translation of the poem "Ismail Moegmat Kassiem": Ismail Moegamat Kassiem he was here in Distric' Six / very much alive / however / then he heard that men will come who can drive bulldozers" (Jansen & Small n.p.).
3. The poem "Trap der jeugd": "Even as a small child, I knew / I was Afrikaans to my core [...] // I was constantly aware / that everything would be terribly difficult / to, as a brown [man = a coloured] / reach the top [...] I hated Apartheid / because it wanted to prevent me / from soaring, everything was / made difficult with evil meanness [...] // now, after and years, forty years, / actually half a century, I found / the Light myself, and / fulfil that small brown child's Wish: / He is bound to Afrikaans forever." (*Die Burger*)

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