

## Peter Blum's 'Kaapse Sonette' and Giochino Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi* From Trastevere to Table Mountain

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**Abstract** 'Kaapse Sonette' (Cape Sonnets) refers to the nine sonnets which Afrikaans poet Peter Blum (Trieste 1925-London 1990) published in two different books of poetry, *Steenbok tot Poolsee* (Capricorn to Polar Sea) in 1955 and *Enklaves van die Lig* (Enclaves of the Light) in 1958, using Giuseppe Gioachino Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi* as inspirational source, in some cases faithfully translating from the Romanesque dialect of the original, in others 'only' transposing the social background of Belli's sonnets to depict the condition, as well as the language, of the black population in Apartheid South Africa. 'The Kaapse Sonette', like the *Romanesque Sonnets*, makes a strenuous attempt to address a monolithic, authoritarian state, a *regime de facto*, unable and unwilling to acknowledge the voices and identities of its own population.

**Keywords** Peter Blum. South Africa. Belli. Italy. Apartheid.

Blum published nine of these sonnets: six in his first volume *Steenbok tot Poolsee* (Capricorn to Polar Sea)<sup>1</sup> of 1955, and three in his second *Enklaves van die Lig* (Enclaves of the Light) of 1958. The South African poet's versions create an 'I' figure, a male, speaking the idiomatic Afrikaans of a Cape Coloured, and relocate the voice as clearly to Cape Town as Belli's protagonist is at home in Rome and Trastevere. (Blum's speaker is unusually anonymous, but seems to be identified in one case.) Some of the Cape Sonnets are faithful versions of originals in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*, but Blum took his admiration for Belli further. The South African poet issued a warning to his friend Barend Toerien:

Not ALL the Cape Sonnets are really translated from Belli. Beware of the double 'leg-pull!' Some (and I don't want to reveal WHICH) are pure Blum, although in Belli's style. (Blum 2008, 321)

Rightly or wrongly Blum argued that Romanesco was not an 'arcane' language and that, in fact, it differed very little from standard Italian.

1 All translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own.

He judged that the language of the Veneto was one of the “difficult dialects”. Perhaps there is an element of creative pride in Blum’s claim that the language of his sonnets was not completely the ‘Kaaps-Kleurlings’ (Cape Coloured) of the anthropological linguist, “but is ALSO just as much an art product as Burns or Theocritus” (Blum 2008, 321). This suggests something important about both Belli and Blum: that in their sonnets they are urban pastoralists. N.P. van Wyk Louw saw that Blum, like his inspiration, had achieved something universal in dialect poetry, in a language of the small, the intimate, the humble (Kannemeyer 1993, 74). The setting of a recognisable local dialect in the strict form of the sonnet with a surprising feeling of dramatic variety makes Blum an honourable companion to Belli.

Peter Blum was born in Europe and died in England, but became a South African, Afrikaans, poet, with, as many commentators noted, a European sensibility.<sup>2</sup> Where in Europe Blum was born is part of his mystery. Applying for South African citizenship in 1948, the poet identified himself as “Austrian (by birth & parentage), German by annexation” (Kannemeyer 1993, 147), and gave his birthplace as Vienna, but later claimed to have been born in Trieste. The Germano-Italian ambiguity is characteristic. His family was German-speaking, and the poet may have been schooled in Berlin, or elsewhere in Germany, and in Switzerland. In his youth he knew Split, the town of Diocletian, about whom he wrote in later life, and he had travelled in Croatia. His youth was multi-lingual: German, Slavic languages, Italian, and an early education in Latin. Later, he studied French and made distinguished translations of Baudelaire and Apollinaire into Afrikaans, the poetic medium he settled on, after having first written verse in English, and even having considered German. As a member of what was a Catholic family with Jewish roots, perhaps Peter Blum can also be thought of as a late citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Blum settled with his parents in South Africa in 1937, when he was twelve. Five years later he matriculated from an English-medium school in Durban (the town of the young Pessoa, Roy Campbell and Douglas Livingstone). He went to the University of Stellenbosch and worked as a librarian in Cape Town and the Free State. His poetry was received, not without controversy, but generally to great critical acclaim. Blum applied for South African citizenship twice, in 1948 and 1959. For complex and not generally satisfactory reasons, he was twice refused, and shortly after the second refusal, he left South Africa with his wife Hettie, never to return, and died in London in 1990. Kannemeyer said that “the departure of Blum from South Africa was more than the mere moving-on of a chance immigrant. It is to this day the greatest single loss suffered by Afrikaans literature” (6).

2 For Blum’s biography I rely on Kannemeyer (1993).

Blum's nine Cape Sonnets as a whole clearly transpose Belli's setting to the 1950s Cape Town of Coloured proletariat. Rome and Trastevere become Cape Town, the Papal state becomes the apartheid South Africa. The clerical/lay division is not simply translated into white/non-white. Blum's "all-encompassing scepticism" (Olivier 2012, 314) and "avowed cosmopolitanism" (Willemse 2012, 433) showed little sympathy with either of the major alternatives of South African identity politics: Black African and Afrikaner. The poet had spent seven years working as a librarian with Coloured readers in Cape Town and seems to have developed what might be called an a-political sympathy with what he saw as their cultural vitality and their humorous detachment from the opposing nationalisms of South Africa.

In Cape Sonnet no. 2 "Oor Monnemente Gepraat" ("Talking of Monuments" in Guy Butler's translation: Grové, Harvey 1962, 321), which may recall Belli's no. 1547 "Er masso di pietra", the speaker mocks, without naming it, the pretentiousness and solemnity of the Voortrekker Monument. The cornerstone of this forty-metre high Afrikaner shrine had been laid in 1938 and the monument itself inaugurated in 1949, shortly after the National Party general election victory of 1948. Blum's speaker, judging the monolith huge, ugly and over-solemn, asks who paid for it, and offers instead recognisable Cape Town public statues ("elkeen soos 'n mens", every one like a person) of figures (both English and Dutch) from the colonial past:

ou Afdum-Murray, Hofmeyr met sy pens;  
hier's Jan van Riebeeck, bakgat aangetrek  
in sy *plus-fours*; Cecil Rhodes wat jou wys  
wa' die reisesbaan lê; en vorie Paalmint-hys  
ou Mies Victôria met ha' klein spanspek.

old No-thumb Murray, Hofmeyr with his gut;  
here's Jan van Riebeeck, very smartly dressed  
in his *plus-fours*; Cecil Rhodes who's pointing  
to the race-course; and in front of Parliament  
old Mrs. Victoria with her little melon.

These statues are spread from the north (Rhodes in the Company Gardens, Queen Victoria at Parliament House), through the centre (Murray at the Groote Kerk<sup>3</sup> and Hofmeyr in Church Square) to the reclaimed foreshore (van Riebeeck), on the spot where the first Dutch settlers might have

<sup>3</sup> Murray's thumb has recently been restored by the sculptor Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe. See "Nuwe duim vir afduim-Murray" by Le Roux Schoeman. URL [vimeo.com/51922658/](http://vimeo.com/51922658/) (2014/03/02).

docked. “Your hinterland is there” is inscribed on the plinth of Rhodes’s statue and the figure points north into Africa: here he gestures in the same direction towards the Milnerton race course. Victoria’s royal orb becomes a musk melon. These recognitions require an intimacy with the locale and a perspective that acknowledges humanity rather than historical significance. Blum would have found both intimacy and the humane perspective in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*.

Blum’s Cape Town setting is also marked by reference to its harbour. No. 3 “Slaaikrappery” (hanky-panky, adultery, literally scratching in the lettuce) deals with one of Belli’s recurring themes: profane love and sex in the context of religion. The speaker denounces a woman he claims has been promiscuously unfaithful to him: she is “Satansgoed” (the Devil’s work), she will go with any sailor, and she does not love Jesus. A number of Belli’s sonnets are dramatic monologues or include dialogue, and in “Ou Groentesmous” (Old Vegetable Hawker, no. 4) Blum’s speaker, identified in the title of the poem, meditates on the passage of time and the aging and passing of his friends, as he addresses a customer. Only Table Mountain, it seems, is unchanging: “Hy’s ‘n goeie ou klippie” (He’s a good old pebble). No. 8 “Planne in die Maanskyn” (Plans in the Moonlight, or Moonshine), perhaps written after the launch of Sputnik on 4th October 1957, imagines human settlement on the moon, where white people will live in posh areas with the names of craters (names which the speaker transliterates so as to suggest the new suburbs of the urbanising Afrikaner middle class). Recalling the separate residential requirements of the Group Areas Act of 1950, the speaker wonders where the Coloured people will settle.

En vir ons?  
Vir ons die donker gatkant van die maan.

And for us?  
For us the dark arsehole of the moon.

Belli raises the possibility of human occupation of the moon in “Er Zignore e Ccaino” (1147, The Lord and Cain), when Cain is banished to “weep in the moon”. The bluestocking daughter-in-law of no. 1294, “La mi’ nora”, is quoted as saying “The moon is inhabited”.

In Blum’s sonnet no. 9 “Die Ou Beslommernis” (The Old Vexation) the speaker addresses a judge or magistrate, acknowledging that in South Africa as in Israel (he quotes a number of Biblical cases) “dassie seks wat iewag pla” (sex is always worrying):

Ingang tot die Hel –  
Ennie ienagste voo’smaak vannie Paradys.

The gateway to Hell  
And the only foretaste of Paradise.

Four of Blum's Cape Sonnets derive directly from particular originals among the *Sonetti Romaneschi*: Belli's sonnet 430 "La Cucina der Papa" is Blum's "Die Miljenêr se Kombuis" (The Millionaire's Kitchen); Belli's 906 "Er Monno muratore" echoes in "Opwekkingspreek" (Revival Sermon); Belli's 521 "La Morte co la Coda" in "Die Nasleep" (The Consequence); Belli's 1515 "Li Padroni de Roma" in "Plegtige Opening" (Ceremonial Opening).

Belli's Pope's kitchen becomes a millionaire's kitchen, as big as "porto di mare", which Blum renders as "die Duncan-dok" (the Duncan Dock), another post-World War II Cape Town building project. The cuisine, which shifts from Roman to Cape, is abundant, but the millionaire, like His Holiness, dines alone. The reference to "'n soort bok" (some kind of buck, or perhaps goat) among the carcasses on display is an urban approximation.

In "Opwekkingspreek" (Revival Sermon, no. 5) the building of the Tower of Babel is re-located to Cape Town's post-World War II building boom. This too has political implications: in Belli's sonnet the crisis comes when the builders of the tower reach the level of St Peter's cross: for Blum the mark is the roof of the tower of "die Ou Mutual" (the Old Mutual Building), for many years the city's tallest edifice. At that point "kon skielik niemand Afrikaans verstaan" (suddenly nobody could understand Afrikaans), where Belli has "Gnisuno ppiù ccapiva l'itajjano". This is a reminder that the Cape Coloureds, whose right to vote had been removed with the passing of the Separate Representation of Voters Act in 1956, are also Afrikaans speakers.

In "Die Nasleep" (The Consequence) Blum holds on to both the universality of Belli's theme and the particularity of his own historical moment. The *sonetto* opens with "Cquà nun ze n'esse" (We cannot escape this alternative), while Blum has "Dissie tweesprong" (It's the crossroads), which shifts the context slightly towards the historical. Blum called "tweesprong... 'n boekwoord", that is a 'bookish word' (Blum 2008, 321). For "ggiacubbini" (Jacobins) Blum has "Komminieste" (suggesting the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950), and for "o mminenti o ppaini" Blum has "Mosleem of Kriste" (Moslem or Christian): many Cape Coloureds are Moslem. The temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil are localised, for example, in "spôts" (sports, games, with a hint of mischief) and "boom" (marijuana). Blum seems to allude further to Cape Town's seaside status: he translates "ccredemo a la legge der Ziggignore" with a maritime metaphor:

ons neem wêk in die Jere se boot;  
Maar as ons volg en vaar - Mosleem of Kriste -  
Dan seil ons teen die groot skrik op - die Dood.

we take work in the Lord's boat;  
 but if we follow and persist - Moslem or Christian -  
 then we sail up against the great fright - Death.

The sea returns in the closing tercet: "drilvis" (jellyfish), "innie stookgat offie kebbin-klaas" (in steerage or in cabin-class), "daai haai bekse Ewagheid" (that shark-mouthed Eternity).

In "Plegtige Opening" (Ceremonial Opening) Blum shifts the general clerical/lay survey of "Li Padroni de Roma" (The Bosses of Rome) to the view of a street-side onlooker at the ceremonial opening of Parliament, an annual Cape Town spectacle. The speaker sees a procession of

die mense wat die wette  
 soos skoenveters lostorring en weer knop -  
 want op watter sole ook al hulle loop,  
 die toon is maar bestem vir ons bruin stête.

the people who untie the laws  
 like shoelaces and tie them up again -  
 because whatever soles they walk on,  
 the toes are intended for our black tails.

Blum captures the sound and sequence of the procession into the House all the way up to the Governor-General, the Senate and the Cabinet. (Blum may be alluding to the National Party's packing of the Senate, by act of Parliament in 1956 in order to achieve the two-thirds majority required to change the constitution, so as to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll.) The specifics of the procession highlight and mock the militarist oppression of the Apartheid state: soldiers, cadets and the police force are followed by "more uniforms and boots and funny hats". The speaker looks back to the Afrikaners' history of descent from the Dutch and ends, where Belli has "Le donne belle e li mariti loro", with "die nonnies met hul basies" (the young madams and their masters).

Blum's nine 'Kaapse Sonnette' are a minuscule proportion of Belli's 2,279 *Sonetti Romaneschi*. While they are not, as Belli's are, dated, day-by-day, over the thirty years of their composition, Blum's have an equally strong sense of historical, social and geographical location. Blum does not achieve Belli's metaphysical urgency, but his political imagination evokes both the class status of his speaker and the possibility of human community. Formally, the Afrikaans poet is faithful to the strict demands of sonnet prosody required to match Belli, so that his versions are the equal of Anthony Burgess's less localised translations and of Robert Garioch's Scots versions. Certainly Blum showed a justified artist's pride in his Cape Sonnets: his biographer suggests this was something that made

his twenty-five years in South Africa not a waste of time (Kannemeyer 1993, 146).

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