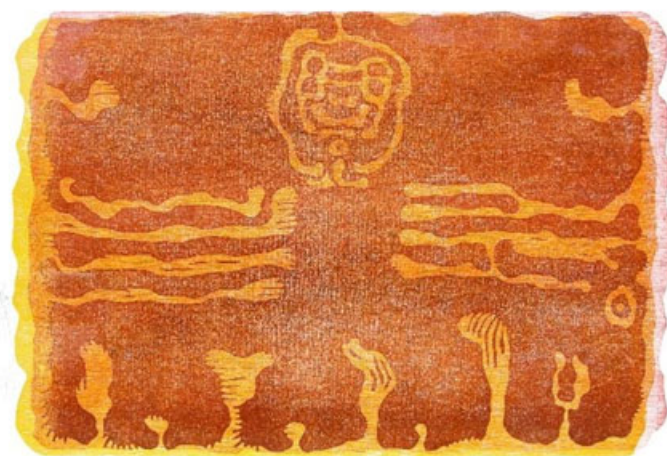


Wopko Jensma, Ravan Press, and the Censors

It is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that Matthews was not the only exponent of anti-poetic tradition in South Africa to unsettle the censors' cultural assumptions in the 1970s. The extraordinarily inventive white anti-poet and graphic artist Wopko Jensma was another challenging case. Unlike Matthews, who rejected the white liberal-literary establishment but went on to found BLAC and to play a key role in the Black Consciousness movement, Jensma was always an extreme outsider figure who defied all forms of classification and allegiance both in his life and in his work. After breaking apartheid laws by marrying across the racial divide, he spent some years living in exile in Mozambique and Botswana; he suffered debilitating mental health problems and, after his marriage broke down in 1969, he began to live an itinerant and finally vagrant life seeking refuge in various welfare institutions; and, with only three slim books to his name, which never enjoyed a wide circulation, he remained a marginal presence on the literary landscape. As the critic Michael



Gardiner put it, 'he built no structures, he established no institutions, he created no stable circle of friends and admirers'.⁶² He eventually disappeared without trace in 1993, aged 54, presumed dead.

Yet Jensma did attract the support of some prominent cultural brokers in the late 1960s and 1970s, including the editors of the literary magazines *Ophir*, *Wurm*, *Contrast*, and the *Purple Renoster*, the publisher Peter Randall at Ravan, and the critic André Brink, who championed his writings in the Afrikaans press. After making his name in the late 1960s, at least in the small world of little magazines, he published three innovatively composite books with Ravan in the course of the next decade: *Sing for our Execution* (1973), *where white is the colour where black in the number* (1975), which was dedicated to Walter Saunders, who co-edited *Ophir* with the poet Peter Horn, and *i must show you my clippings* (1977). Jensma himself played a key part in designing all three volumes, often in collaboration with various black artists, which experimented with the relationship between text and image, typography and layout. During this creative period, he also earned the respect of a number of young Black poets. As Gwala recalled, 'black readers loved to read the poet–artist Wopko Jensma'. Like 'everybody with whom I discussed poetry of the day', he 'enjoyed Wopko', whose 'observation of the apartheid scenario was brilliant, and very open'.⁶³ Indeed, for a long time he was convinced Jensma was black. Yet whereas many of the younger Black poets learned from African American writers and the South American revolutionary tradition, Jensma, who wrote in an untranslatable admixture of colloquial English, Afrikaans, and African languages, as well as various dialects and street argots, identified primarily with the European Dadaists of the early twentieth century. His third volume, *i must show you my clippings*, includes the following manifesto-like sequence:

i state, i recall, recall
kurt schwitters
jean arp
theo van doesburg
francis picabia
tristan tzara
recall, call, fukol, all.⁶⁴

While the police, who submitted both his first volumes to the censors, clearly considered Jensma a serious threat, the censors themselves were less sure. They passed *Sing for our Execution*, despite its politically provocative content, but they banned *where white is the colour*, even though they could make little sense of it. Jansen, the security censor, who was the initial reader for the second volume (no report on the first appears to have survived), found 'the majority of the poems' not 'easy to digest and sometimes incomprehensible' (P75/4/35). Nevertheless, he recommended that the collection be banned,

largely because some sequences appeared to 'insult whites' or advocate violent revolution. He also noted that one seemed to refer to the dissident Afrikaner Communist Bram Fischer as the 'bo-baas' ('top boss') and that another called South Africa 'Republic Azania'. His senior colleague Murray agreed, adding that it 'could not be let through, no matter what its literary value might be' because the 'content is consciously grievance-stirring and inciting'. In his chair's report, summarizing the decision to ban the volume under all three political clauses in June 1975, Jansen emphasized that the animus was particularly directed against the 'white Afrikaner', who is 'presented as tyrant, as thief, hypocrite, etc.'

Yet he acknowledged that it was 'an extremely difficult case', not least because, having consulted two literary censors, Merwe Scholtz and T. T. Cloete, both professors of Afrikaans who were also poets, he recognized that it was 'really "something new" in South African literature'. Though they did not see it as an example of a nascent anti-poetic tradition, it is clear from the literary censors' reports that they did not consider Jansen a bad or failed poet. Merwe Scholtz, who agreed with Jansen's overall assessment, remarked that 'Jansen has a sort of rugged talent and I cannot write him off as of little value from a literary point of view.' 'I can also see', he added, that given its 'difficult and, for me, sometimes impenetrable idiom', the 'collection often obscures its own "message"'. His hesitation about the idea of a poem containing a clear message once again reflected his underlying formalist assumptions about the nature of poetic language.

In an effort to unpack some of these obscurities, Cloete offered an interpretation of two particularly worrying sequences: 'Only the best' and 'Umlilo, So Hell'. Given the referential uncertainties and densely figural nature of the first, he was obliged to speculate about its possible meanings in a way that can only be described as extraordinarily but revealingly paranoid. The sequence begins:

we walk down streets of love
brandishing flags of blood
our eyes ears tongues locked
in silence
only the drumbeat of our feet.⁶⁵

About these cryptic lines, which make no explicit reference to any rebels, Cloete commented:

Surely it is . . . a clear case predicting revolution ('brandishing flags of blood', 'the drumming of our feet', 'slit throats')—and the rebels are surely the Bantu (the drum gives the decisive clue), and the poem makes out as if they are the hungry

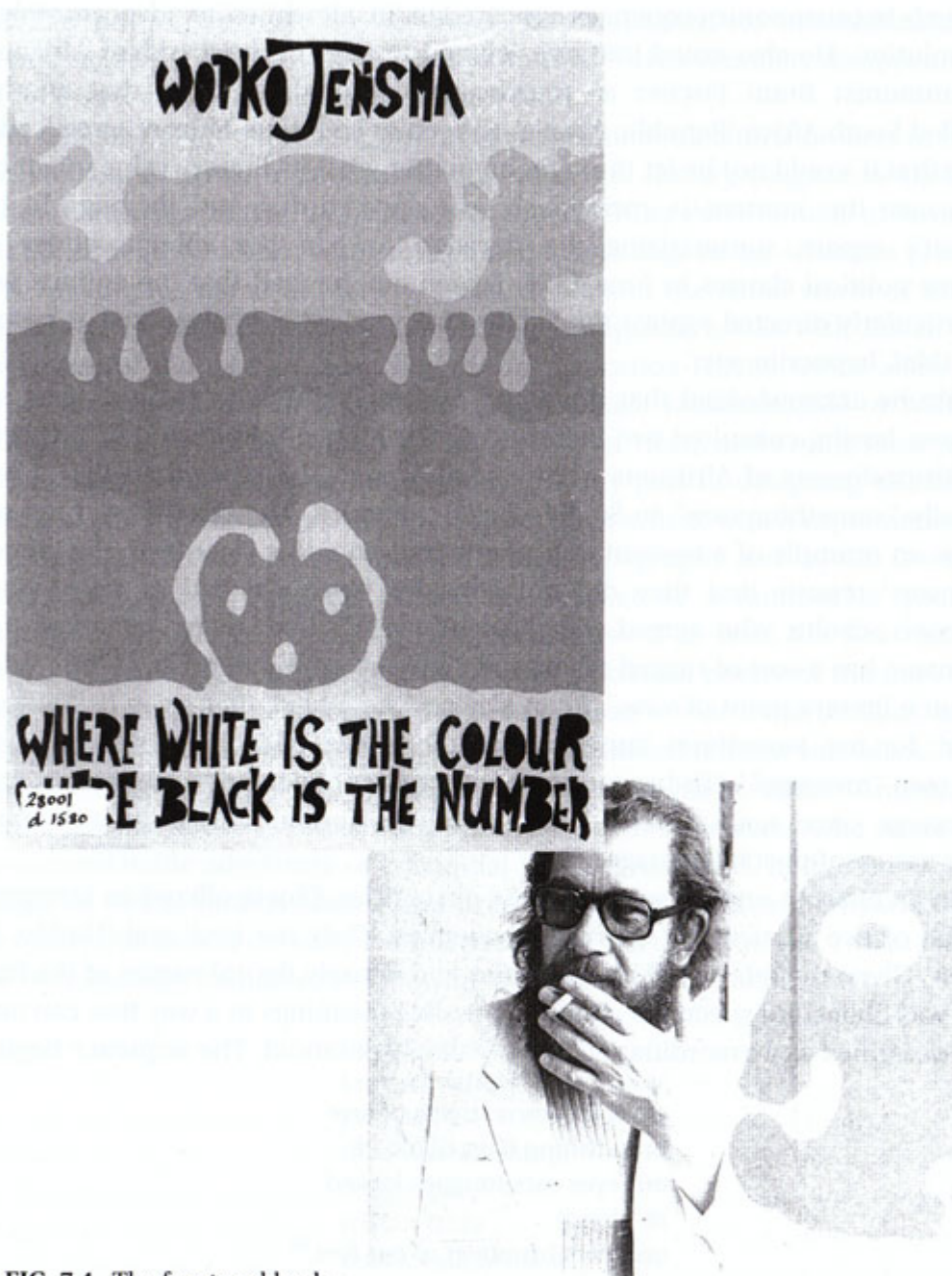


FIG. 7.4. The front and back cover of Wopko Jensma's *where white is the colour where black is the number* (1975). Peter Wilhelm, the critic quoted on the back cover, describes Jensma both as 'a terrifying, new sort of human' and as 'the first South African'.

Hierdie animalisme gief my dieper wese—ook die verbastering van Jensma se taalgebruik (kroonling van afrikaans en engels)—is skynheilig in die ergste graad. Wilens en wetens trek hy die Blanke, en ook homself, deur die modder. —**Okker Smit, Sondaggenas**

At the conference on South African English literature last year, I predicted that Wopko Jensma would, in many ways, point the way for a new eloquence in this country. —**Kidley Beeton, S.A.B.C.**

The reader's initial and, indeed, lasting impression is that Jensma is an African—possibly of Sophiatown. His use of words and phrases nevertheless seems, at times, that of an American Negro rather than of a man from the Transvaal. —**Mary Morison Webster, Sunday Times**

Jensma is Jensma—he has his own style, an amalgam of languages and song that is his trademark, and his graphic work is familiar enough by now, like a continuing set of variations on a theme that is very much his own. —**Stephen Gray, Star Literary Supplement**

This is the clue to Jensma. He stays together, in shape, alchemically combining enormously diverse cultures and experiences. He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African. —**Peter Wilhelm, To the Point**

who will rebel to get bread, and bread can here mean: possession of the land.
This is again an 'anti-capitalist' poem.

While the first part of the sequence ends with the quasi-messianic lines

our hands up high as we praise
the one and only holy dream:
slit throats for love of bread,

the second more obviously incantatory section focuses on 'our lord's voice in the air'.⁶⁶ With its reference to 'the four-colour of yore', it is fairly clear that the 'we' in the whole sequence refers not to the 'Bantu', as Cloete thought, but to the Afrikaner. It is they who recall the four-colour flag of the old Transvaal Republic, known in Afrikaans as the 'Vierkleur' (literally 'Four-colour'), it is they who 'remember our land our greed', and it is, therefore, the Afrikaner who pursues the bloody, sacrificial 'one and only holy dream' no doubt of a racially pure and culturally apart *volk*.⁶⁷

In a similarly paranoid vein, Cloete insisted with some desperation that 'Umlilo', a poem which speculates uncertainly about the mysterious origins of a world riven by racism, played 'the "white collars" off against the non-whites', in part by relying on the 'double meaning' of the word 'boss'. The obscure final lines read:

and i also know my god is boss
his son, soul brother jesus
keeps for me my bottle of red.⁶⁸

On the one hand, Cloete remarked, the word 'boss' refers 'to the Bureau of State Security', the infamous agency founded in 1969 which was known by its acronym, BOSS, but, on the other hand, it 'becomes a new overlord, a new boss, whose son, "soul brother jesus", gives a flask containing something red to the non-whites, and this red cannot be anything other than the red of revolution, and it is not impossible that it is the Communist red'. About another sequence, 'Hide his head', which disturbs all forms of racialized thinking, he remarked: 'the murder victim is surely a white, anyway it is someone with long hair'. In parentheses he added: 'Throughout the collection the "we" and "I" who speak are non-white, and therefore in this case too; the one who murdered the long-haired [or 'arty', if read figuratively] person, is therefore non-white.' Though he felt the sequence entitled 'Trains' was 'for me not clear at all', he also understood this to be a 'freedom song for the non-white'.

Yet for all the demands Jensma's self-consciously equivocal, anti-poetic language made on him as a reader, Cloete, like Merwe Scholtz, had no hesitation in recommending that the collection be banned for ridiculing Afrikaners, for harming race relations, and for sedition. In his concluding remarks he observed:



We must not forget that a collection such as this is one of many that are appearing in South Africa today, not an isolated case—think of Breyten's *Skryt*, of the poems of the black poets Matthews, Kunene and Serote, among others. It is becoming a whole thick stream, and should it not be stopped before it is too late?

When the South African Library submitted the collection for review thirteen years later, the situation was reversed. As one of the committee members noted

The present reader's (Prof. M. G. Scholtz) opinion of this book differs quite significantly from that of the previous three experts who studied this book at the time of its first submission in 1975. They felt that this work had literary merit, but that it should be banned because of its political content. Prof Scholtz calls it out and out rubbish but does not think it is undesirable! (P87/9/96)

Scholtz had remarked that 'there will no doubt be those who would label this poetry, but in my view it is the biggest heap of nonsense I have seen for a long time', which, he added, 'undermined my trust in the publisher's ability to separate the wheat from the chaff before publication'. In the end the committee, which Jansen again chaired, decided to uphold the ban, which the chief censor, Abraham Coetzee, chose not to appeal. When it was eventually lifted in June 1990, the initial reader, who pointed out that the collection would not attract a wide readership, called it 'an example of committed and protest-poetry' (P90/5/44). 'As far as the committee can ascertain, and taking the high praise on the back cover into consideration,' the chair added, 'some of the poetry is possibly even of a high quality.' In one of the reviews Ravan used on the back cover, the young writer Peter Wilhelm observed of Jensma: 'He stays together, in shape, alchemically combining enormously diverse cultures and experiences. He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African.'⁶⁹ As the chair of the censorship committee also admitted, however, 'many of the poems, if they mean anything, are obscure even for intelligent readers'.



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