

Is there 'new' poetry in post-apartheid South Africa?

THE IMAGES collaged on the front cover of this book are all, in one respect, clichés. They convey the obvious symbols of modern South Africa: Mandela, Buthelezi, Verwoerd, a springbok, a protea, the New South African flag, Table Mountain, a lion, Miriam Makeba, the Johannesburg skyline, Zulu maidens, an urban shacktown. And if they are clichés and thus worn, in fact too well known and in some respects facile, why then should they have been chosen?

One answer is that despite their high exposure, they continue to relay the key elements of our identities, and hence still deserve respect as conveyors of information. Another is that the “obvious” and generalized conclusions presented by the media about South Africa are inadequate (to the task of capturing the essences of our still divided but dynamic society), and we, as poets, offer them to you ironically – indeed, we hope our poems will break their surfaces: that they will take you into the guts of our fears and fantasies, take you into our emotional and physical landscapes by tapping the force and life in them. And this transformation wrought by words will happen because their themes, images, styles and rhythms will be truer, more honest, to our particular and more objective realities than the agencies of news reporting.

Art is dependent on and a reflection of the political situation in a society at any given time. (By “political” one refers to the whole complex of individual and social relations that give rise to a culture.) And to discuss South Africa, including the poetry being written and performed here, is to do so both in the shadow of apartheid and its legacies, as well as in the glow of the energy unleashed by the struggle against it. This tension is deep rooted. It permeates all aspects of our lives, infusing the daily contradictions of transition.

On the one hand, there is substantial and ongoing transformation. An authoritarian, racist superstructure has been prized open by a constitution that offers unparalleled human rights, and whose influence is felt at many different levels. Today we have genuine freedom of expression and association, legal equality for women and gay people, and the deracialisation of workplaces, residential areas and social institutions. Also of key importance, we are coming of age with regard to sexual identity and practices. In the past we had to deal with deep seated repression; Afrikaner Calvinism and African feudal polygamy were both rigid, conservative modes of living, and though seemingly adversarial, held many points of congruity. And so there have been important and positive advances. However, the immediate post-apartheid period has also been characterized by mass unemployment, coarse materialism, widespread sexual and criminal violence, large-scale corporate and state corruption and deadly epidemics of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. As a result there is a national sense of buoyancy mixed with despair. The stability

of institutions and question marks over progress in poverty eradication being major factors.

Artists in extreme societies often find such contrasts offer wide and substantial subject matter, while, at the same time, also causing great personal trauma and insecurity. But there is another angle to consider. If, as Oscar Wilde famously said, “All art is quite useless”, what does it matter, as an artist, if one is living in an economically and socially divided, and often violent, country which in broad terms reflects all the major human imbalances plaguing our planet? After all, the primary impulse behind art making is not didactic, utilitarian or wealth-creating. We make and appreciate art because a “germ”, some seemingly irrational impulse to express and give voice and form to our agonies as well as our joys, and to provide definitive philosophical and moral commentaries, forces its way out of our beings. And if in the process of making art one tries to right the wrongs of the world (a romantic and youthful pastime?) that is hardly the stuff that either keeps middle class societies on what they believe is the upward curve of social and personal liberation, or amuses patriarchal tribal ones that do not wish to be challenged.

In this vein, the key literary polemic from the early 1970s onwards was whether “protest” or “struggle” poetry qualified as “real poetry”. The academic establishment and most reviewers generally slated such work as sloganeering and propagandistic simply because its main focus was to expose the evils of the social system and to mobilize the victims to resist. Such subject matter was said to lack elegance or subtlety and to be crudely expressed. Purity of language and non-political themes were held to be the ideals that were to be structured in the forms that emanated from Britain, and to some extent the United States. Poetry written in South African English was frowned upon – particularly when languages were mixed and local jargon used.

Now at that time such narrowness was to be expected because in the alienated, elitist society that was Apartheid South Africa, artistic norms were set by the ruling (white) nationalist/colonial class. Only as an afterthought, were a tiny number of black writers or radical writers (radical in subject matter, tone and style) admitted into the canon – their acceptance being hard-won, and in most cases only achieved (certainly with respect to Black writers) by dint of their having absorbed the colonial/ metropolitan models and demonstrated proficiency in reproducing them.

However, as the anti-colonial revolt gathered momentum, new challenges to that hegemony grew confident enough to create their own mechanisms for artistic production and distribution. In the 1970s a rash of new magazines and publishers gave a platform to a wide range of previously unheard voices. This diversity was accelerated by the open revolt of the 1980s so that the “canon” began to widen and reflect the true cultural mix of our society. As importantly, poetry, as a means for expressing and extending the revolutionary currents, achieved a mass following at political meetings and funerals, and though still largely ignored by the academic

establishment, became a mass art form enjoying high legitimacy and appreciation.

Now, twenty years later, there is a de-escalation of the mass movements, and people are generally apathetic in the face of their disempowerment. Anti-ideological currents and consumerism rule mass consciousness. With the globalization of the capitalist system, the contestation between the neo-liberal ruling classes and green/egalitarian thinking continues to play itself out in both familiar ways and in the genuinely new and unpredictable. In literary terms, this battle is being fought in various terrains: in publishing (what publishers will promote/what they believe will sell), in the media (in the mix and orientation of reviews and art programs), around cultural awards and selections for school curricula and university courses reinforcing or revising – challenging? – standards of excellence; and, lastly, around financial support (both state and corporate) for work that the commercial sector is not prepared to fund.

What then is the state of poetry in South Africa today? The news is both good and bad. If in the 1970s and 80s white academia and the press insisted that only the lyrically sedate was acceptable, and this was successfully resisted by the radical, today in the first decade of the twenty-first century the same arguments are being used to sideline and sometimes attack independent non-commercial publishers that support politically and sexually frank writing. This backlash comes after a temporary lull – the honeymoon of the 1990s when the “Mandela rainbow nation”, though largely ignoring the hard truths of inequality and corruption, was nevertheless vibrant, full of promise and ready to experiment.

Now critics frequently damn these poets by calling them doctrinaire and bemoan their lack of “craft”, as if conventional British English forms and themes are hallowed. And though contemporary South African poetry offers a wide spectrum of experience and utilizes rhythms suitable to our natural speech and expression, and more literary magazines, websites and publishers are available for poetry and fiction than ever before – and the appreciation of and support for poetry performance is enjoying unprecedented interest – the critical apparatus that analyzes and dispenses literary recognition is still very narrow.

Now what is all this new poetry about? Is it powerful, unique, relevant? Let me again quote Oscar Wilde (a politicized writer if ever there was one): “diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex and vital”; and let me offer some thoughts on and examples of poets whose work, I believe, does break new ground and is re-establishing the parameters of South African writing. The twelve represented here have all been published by Botsotso and form part of our attempt to encourage and promote compelling and original work.

Ike Mboneni Muila's work is written mainly in “*isicamtho*” (or “*tsotsi taal*”), an amalgam of South African languages that developed among both criminal and artistic circles in the black townships in the 1950s. He also writes in Venda, the

language of a minority tribe. Ike's work is often humorous with a tongue-in-cheek audacity that provokes much laughter when performed. His subject matter though is deadly serious – the ravages of poverty, drink, drugs and violent death – though there are also celebrations of love and friendship and the dawning of new promise. Ike's style is based on free association, juxtaposition, repetition and punning, and is often songlike.

Writing from a far more explicit political position is **Vonani Bila**. His work deals with the destructiveness of neo-liberal economics and the lack of genuine racial reconciliation (particularly ongoing white racism), and offers portraits of the marginalized and brutalized, particularly prostitutes and madmen. His poetry shouts out against the betrayal of social solidarity by the new Black elite and the continuing helplessness of the unemployed and destitute. Inevitably, Vonani, like all similarly inspired poets, treads a fine line: outrage and political analysis can threaten original thinking and imagery, cliché and predictable structure can threaten fresh language and rhythms. That he largely succeeds in overcoming these pitfalls is because he adopts a multi-layered approach, often using surreal images and irony to comment on our sanity – both social and individual.

Makhosazana Xaba on the other hand, though as committed to social change, and as outraged by racism and inequality as Vonani, adopts a softer, subtler, less jagged approach to these issues. Her world (though a veteran of the ANC military underground) is a more individual one; an often lyrical one with humour and a certain mischievousness. Her tone, then, though informed by harsh social realities, is not consumed by their often fatal consequences. As such, beauty and tenderness are also to be found in her poems.

Of another mood is **Kobus Moolman**, whose poetry is meditative and sombre, portraying moments of silence and dislocation, or scenes of emptiness and mystery. Kobus, a white Afrikaner who largely writes in English, is very affected by the natural environment, the physicality of the countryside. His work also carries a definite but subtle religious element; underlying the mood of mortality is a strong sense of timelessness. To convey the immediacy of current events and sensations he uses images that are elemental, yet full of paradox.

Anet Kemp's work is erotic and metaphysical. She is both romantic and crude, using mythology and fairy tales to express the different forms of sensuality and love that possess men and women. And she is fascinated by the extra-terrestrial. Anet's work is adventurous and technically challenging, moving with a freeness that is simultaneously tight and well ordered, and defies easy categorization.

Most of **Donald Parenzee**'s poems were written in the 1980s and 90s. His work is mature and considered, philosophical and densely textured with a strong visual sense. Expressing an acute awareness of the suffering of others, yet with the reticence of a "loner", Donald's finely composed yet vital poems are models for a poetry that wishes to crystallize ideas and also carry emotion. Donald was active in

the now defunct Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) and was a key proponent of worker/community-based publishing.

Lisemelo Tlale is of the generation that straddled the last days of apartheid and the emergence of a free South Africa. Educated at a private school, intimately familiar with European culture, she mixes that new sensibility with irony and word-play, indulging her command of English with her identity as an African of Sotho origin. As a new entrant to middle class society, what is she to make of being black in what are still mainly white-run companies and institutions? It is no accident that this search for identity has taken her to Europe where she currently lives. It will be interesting to see the direction her writing takes once this new experience is absorbed.

On the other hand, **Bongekile Mbanjwa**, an older woman who lived through the worst times of apartheid, has no doubts about her Zulu identity. She writes in Zulu and is preoccupied with the disintegration of the indigenous traditions that defined people's lives for so long. Her poems are both a lament for the old and established ways and a cry to the younger generation who are forsaking these traditions, but often living in parasitical ways, dependent on their parents. The imagery of her poems is taken from the rural Zulu life that competes with urban realities. In general, her sense of loss, though acute and interrogative, is not despairing.

Sumeera Dawood writes intimately about her preoccupations – including the stifled sexuality of traditional Cape Muslim life. Her observations of this milieu are sharp and honest, stripping pretension and artifice. A significant proportion of her poems contain tinges of late-adolescent depressiveness but they are articulated in a cool and sophisticated way. In short, she is a trenchant exposé of hypocrisy and the gap between word and deed.

The poetry of **Clinton du Plessis**, who lives in Cradock, a small town founded by English settlers in the Eastern Cape, is about the national and international political morass; and the worlds of addiction (drugs, alcohol), sexual abuse, gangsterism. He uses Afrikaans with telling effect to describe these alienated states. Clinton also experiments with typographic effects and plays with structure; a laconic style punctuated by analytic sharpness.

Siphiwe ka Ngwenya specializes in performance, combining a lyrical sensuality with hard-nosed social observation. Once also very involved in COSAW, he has worked to build a popular literary movement that is active both in the historic black townships and in the middle class sector. He writes in both English and Zulu, often using jazz/blues rhythms with touches of a Zulu imbongi (praisesinger/poet) but not falling prey to cliché or nostalgic tradition, and consistently challenges easy assumptions.

Diversity is the hallmark of our society; this recognition immediately opens space for the commonalities to also be appreciated in literature. Edges may rub raw – the idealism (naïvete?) of revolutionary change has given way to a meaner sense in the face of so any competing interests. However, South African poetry is vital

enough to not just survive. It can flourish. But, this can only be the case if there is a core of original poets who will not compromise their visions. Together with many others, I believe the poets in this anthology offer that evidence.

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