A CRITICAL SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY

A CRITICAL SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY:

THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT AND COMMITMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

The thesis concentrates on South African poetry from 1960 to the present. It closely examines a selection of poems by Breyten Breytenbach, Dennis Brutus, Pascal Gwala, Wopko Jensma, Oswald Mtshali, Arthur Nortje, Cosmo Pieterse, Sipho Sepamla, and Wally Serote, among others. The body of the thesis discusses these poets' contributions to poetry about prison, exile, and township life.

The thesis focuses on the struggle between various polical, racial, and cultural groups for hegemony over South Africa's poetic development. Such issues as language, ideology, and censorship are explored insofar as they influence the content and structure of the poetry. This body of poems, sadly, is little studied in North America. The thesis presents an introduction to and a survey of the major tendencies in South African poetry and, in part, attempts to relate the poetry's role in expressing the commitment of these poets to the ending of apartheid and the eventual resolution of the conflict for freedom.

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Chapter One

Linguistic Apartheid: Language and Ideology

The poet Sipho Sepamla, in an essay on the problems and dilemmas of the black writer in South Africa, reiterates the main linguistic and ideological issues debated amongst critics of South African literature.[1] Sepamla begins his paper by "playing a South African game":

> I must define this black writer. He is an African (amongst coloureds and Indians). He writes in English (sacrificing his mother tongue). He is urban (lacking some knowledge of his counterpart in the 'homelands').
>
> Having insulated myself thus, I want to add that I owe nobody any apologies because I remain a human being.[2]

Sepamla identifies the essential contradictions in South African writing. While writers take pride in their cultural heritage, a product of colour, language, history, and geography, they also reject these determinants as being unduly limiting. The black poet, in particular, is criticized for writing overtly about the political realities of being a black South African. White poets like Douglas Livingstone require that poetry be judged by "internationally established yardsticks".[3] Other poets, like Lionel Abraham, argue that the poet's blackness should not be considered a quality by which poetry can be defined.[4] While Livingstone and Abraham sincerely believe their approach to be the best guarantee of an unbiased, universal set of critical standards, they both tend to rely upon an established Western, usually British, tradition of literary

criticism. The critics who support a white-oriented, English, liberal tradition describe black writers as creating poetry which is usually politically shrill, formally inept and transient.[5] On the other hand, black writers and critics like David Maughan Brown argue that white literary traditions are not universally applicable and that literature must be culturally determined by the standards of the community to which the writer belongs,[6] and that all literature has a political aim, including that which claims to be apolitical.[7]

The white, liberal tradition of poetry and literary criticism remains a strong, if impoverished, element in the literary mosaic of South Africa. Stephen Watson defines liberalism as having the following characteristics: first, while believing in slow reform, it asserts that literature should be apolitical. Second, it approaches literature sceptically and empirically, and it avoids dealing with the irrational. Finally, it asserts the primacy of the individual. Thus, social issues are subordinated to psychological ones.[8] Although most white poets are opposed to apartheid, they argue against politically motivated poetry. Nevertheless their belief in an unbiased literature also makes a political statement, which inadvertently supports the *status quo* because it provides no strong opposition to it.

Frankie Ntsu kaDitshego/Dube's poem, "The Ghettos," published in the July-August 1979 issue of *Staffrider*, cuts

through the liberal's pretence of an objective, apolitical stance:

> Those who claim to be non-smokers are wrong
> The place is polluted with smoke from
> Chimneys
> Trucks
> Hippos
> Gun-excited camouflage
> dagga-smokers
> and burning tyres
> Non-smokers are smokers too![9]

The carefully-chosen images point to supporters of industry, and to those who hide behind military barricades, as indirectly adding to the pollution of apartheid. The poetry of white liberals like Guy Butler bases "itself on the notion that English is an instrument of reason", and thus "this poetry, like liberal politics again, becomes an instrument of estrangement, apathy and impotence."[10] The passivity of the objective observer has not created an atmosphere of rational reform; instead, Watson argues, the "banality" of this poetry has helped to create an atmosphere of passive acceptance of apartheid policies.[11] Unfortunately, most white poets, by criticizing the active politics in black poetry, inadvertently contribute to the silencing of protest. Thus, black poets from the late sixties onwards have tended to become more and more critical of the intentions of white poets and of the values of the liberal tradition.

Refusing to take up a radical anti-apartheid position, the poetry of white English-speaking South Africa is increasingly conservative. Watson argues that "the

limitations of this culture, the sterilizing influence of its 'aesthetic'... are all too apparent in the purged but scarcely purgative language...."[12] Guy Butler typifies the poet who surfeits on British literature to counter what he perceives as the still wild and poetically inappropriate environment of South Africa.[13] Christopher Hope is another example of the white poet who uses language conservatively, to protect the "truth" rather than to disclose reality. In fact, Hope's poem "In the Middle of Nowhere", condemns the blacks as having rebelled against the efforts of the liberals to help them.[14] Hope presents the whites as loving adults, concerned about black society within South Africa, but impotent to help the rebellious and ungrateful hordes of black children. While whites are presented as creative and nurturing, even gentle, the blacks are portrayed as primitive and destructive. Hope reinforces white fears and rationalizations, while preserving the myth of black irrationality. Furthermore, the poem attempts to stifle the call to freedom, and turns from an openly political message to the garden, to nature, as the appropriate topic of poetry. While not overtly pro-apartheid, the anti-black sentiments cannot be viewed as apolitical. Hope is a liberal supporting the system.

Nevertheless, the liberal literary tradition has influenced coloured[15] and black poets like Dennis Brutus, Cosmo Pieterse, Mazisi Kunene, and Oswald Mtshali. While Brutus admits the influence of Donne, Eliot, Yeats, and

Joyce's *Ulysses,* Mazisi Kunene admires and closely studies Shakespeare.[16] Kunene especially admires Shakespeare's "use of language as a vehicle of communication in expressing what is contained in the character or depicting the character involved."[17] However, both Kunene and Brutus lack a strongly militant edge to their poems.[18] For example, Brutus uses a troubadour motif in *Sirens Knuckles Boots*, an early collection of his poems, which removes the emphasis from South Africa to Southern France and from the contemporary period to the medieval. Kunene, on the other hand, has evolved an interest in Zulu poetry. Despite his connection to British literature, Kunene has become increasingly suspicious of white liberalism, which is so often ignorant of black mythology and poetic traditions, and which so often condescendingly condemns the concrete imagery of praise poetry.[19] Increasingly frustrated by the negative response of white critics, South African poets turn to a black African audience and to the African oral traditions. English culture is slowly losing its authority as black poets explore new forms and new linguistic variations distinct from those of the liberal tradition.

A typical example of the liberal's negative response is an article entitled "Dilemmas in Black Poetry" published in a 1977 issue of the Cape Town journal *Contrast,* and written by Dr. A. G. Ullyatt. While claiming to be disinterested, Dr. Ullyatt views black poets as attempting to use the ancient, culturally enriched English language in a

culturally undeveloped environment. Since English is a second language for black poets, Dr. Ullyatt attributes their occasional successes to accident.[20] In response, Hedy Davis in a later issue of *Contrast* challenges Ullyatt's assumptions about black poets. Firstly, she objects to Dr. Ullyatt's presentation of "his aesthetics as based on objective and universal norms." Rather than being neutral, Ullyatt uses "a typical ruling class tactic."[21] Secondly, Davis uses Joseph Conrad as an example of a successful writer in English as a second language.[22] Furthermore, Dennis Brutus and Arthur Nortje hold degrees from Oxford and they have both taught English literature at North American universities. They have a complex understanding of English literature which they are able to bring to their poetry. Their successful poems are more likely to be consciously contrived than accidental.

On the other hand, all South African poems in English, whether the poet is black, coloured, or white, have been criticized by Brutus, Pieterse, and Butler for suffering from weaknesses. Either the poet has presented "surface anguish and bitterness," sacrificing art, or the poems lack substance due to a "failure to confront life."[23] For some, poetry has become a vehicle "for slogans, angry protest and a political message."[24] Polished style is sacrificed to the aim of educating whites and of stirring blacks out of their apathy.[25] Mazisi Kunene, however, says that poetry only becomes didactic when it assumes an attitude of superiority.

Instead, most African poetry "holds up to ridicule things that are socially inacceptable [sic]."[26] Humour, wit, and the distinctly African sounds of poets like Kunene and Sepamla subtly criticize apartheid without sacrificing art. Moreover, the poetry is freed from associations with "the Great Tradition."[27] Nevertheless, Cosmo Pieterse still sees the "gutlessness" of much South African poetry, and its dependence on white literary values, as the main problems. Rather than considering it to be too political, Pieterse wishes South African poetry to be even more confrontational.

Perhaps of all the arguments which occur between the liberal and the black aesthetics, the most widespread and interesting is the debate over language. The preference for writing in English is itself politically motivated for most South African poets, since a poem's political significance is often tied to the language in which it is written. Mokoena Xihoshi, in "Poetry Towards the Revolution," questions the role of language in asserting cultural supremacy:

> Is not the use of English itself by our writers and by our literary commentators/ critics -- an instance of our being victims of an insidious kind of cultural imperialism?[28]

By writing in English, the poet indirectly expresses sympathy with the white liberal tradition. While English does provide a *lingua franca* among all South Africans, no matter what their first language is, and while English opens up the possibilities of communication outside Africa, the

poet "assimilates, even without realizing it, elements which are foreign, indeed profoundly repugnant, to him."[29] The increasing use of English in the daily lives of South Africans is seen at special events like weddings and funerals, in the importance of English in the schools, and most importantly in the printing of English-language newspapers and magazines.[30] English is also preferable to the other language of the whites, Afrikaans, which most black South Africans perceive as the language of oppression.[31]

The problem becomes one of how to be politically subversive in a language which implicitly carries within it the values which these poets wish to overthrow. Cosmo Pieterse suggests that by avoiding poetic embroidery the possibilities of ambiguity are reduced.[32] In his poem, "Song *(We Sing)*", Pieterse uses a simple, lyrical style:

> We sing our sons who have died red
> Crossing the sky where barbed wire passes
> Bullets of white paper, nails of grey lead
> And we sing the moon in its dying phases.[33]

Death is inescapable in this poem, as are grief and anger. The images of the bullets, the nails, and the moon unambiguously reinforce the singers' emotions. Furthermore, the collective pronoun "we" makes the emotions communal rather than indiviual. In another poem, "Guerilla," Pieterse concludes "That we must march over the length of all your / life, transgressing your whole body with harsh / boots upon our feet."[34] The reader cannot interpret the poem in a manner which supports the *status quo* because the

revolutionary intention has been made inescapable.

On the other hand, the Afrikaans poet Wopko Jensma uses a plurilingual approach. By combining English, Afrikaans, and African languages, Jensma's poems attempt to end the linguistic apartheid in South African poetry. For instance, in "Joburg Spiritual" Jensma begins with street slang and ungrammatical language.[35] Jensma uses language to flout authority, in this poem the authority of the police. He uses slang to recreate the atmosphere of a township street in which the violence of the police occurs almost as casually as slang does in general conversation. Moreover, the ungrammatical structure creates a staccato rhythm in which the short lines punctuate and emphasize the events being narrated in the longer lines. In the final section of the poem, Jensma uses a common English sentence pattern, subject-verb-object, to emphasize the boredom created by the repetition of "approved" patterns of language.[36] The oppression created by the state is paralleled by the oppression created by the repetitive syntax and language. Jensma has taken two political holidays, Dingaan's Day and Republic Day,[37] and reduced them to meaningless markers of the passage of time. Jensma thus undermines the political significance of these two dates. Moreover, by placing two different styles of English side by side, he exposes the gap between the rigid grammar of the oppressors and the flexiblility of the oppressed, and the gap between how these two groups perceive the world.

Although contemporary South African poetry has been accused of formal ineptitude, numerous poets show a sophisticated ability for language play. Poets like Arthur Nortje record their meticulous attention to detail. In Nortje's Oxford journal, on February of 1966, he writes that "I spend hours carefully chiselling, paring, elaborating, balancing words *so they give pleasure.* For I love the Beautiful."[38] [Italics are mine]. Despite the political concerns of most black poets, there is also a desire to give pleasure to the reader through the richness of the text. Sepamla also plays on the pleasure of language by using blues and jazz rhythms:

> I've learnt to sing the blues
> I says I've learnt to sing the blues
> I mean them true Soweto Blues
>
> ...
>
> youngmen playing at dice I do
> youngmen lounging around for lack of work I do
> youngmen pleading for a world to love I do[39]

Sepamla's poems must be read aloud so that the balanced rhythms of the lines recreate the effects found in blues music. Despite the desperation and darkness of the lives he describes, there is also a powerful resonance created by repetition of words and the strong beat. Xihoshi describes the language play of South African poets as "the gallows' humour, the macabre wit, the defence mechanism of laughter in the face of adversity and a simultaneous girding of the loins...."[40] Humour, repetition, song rhythms, and rhythms from African oral poetry give the poems a structural

looseness without leaving the poems shapeless. Instead of adopting British stanzaic forms, the black poet has innovated new patterns better adapted to his cultural bias.

Even more annoying to the liberal tradition than the subversion of form, is the "impurity" of the English found in many poems which lack the formality of BBC English. Oswald Mtshali, however, argues against an ornate and lofty poetic style. He asserts

> that the English that we use in our poetry is not the Queen's language that you know as written by say Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is the language of urgency.... We have not got the time to embellish this urgent message with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments....[41]

Mtshali discards the language of the Romantics with its emphasis on the lyrical for a more desperate, less polished, and often crude idiom. Xihoshi elaborates on the ways in which black poets use a specialized vocabulary. Often poets blend English, street jive, Afrikaans, and African languages within the English framework to recreate the relationship between English and African points of reference.[42] Thus, in "Mkize", Sepamla mixes the languages into Soweto street idiom.[43] Mkize, a new arrival in Soweto from the Transkei tribal homelands, tries to barter a skilpad (tortoise) for bootlegged alcohol in a *shebeen* (an illegal drinking parlour). Since he lives outside the law, Mkize is a subversive and dashing figure. He is treated humorously and the mixture of African, Afrikaans, and English languages adds to the subversive tone. For instance, *skilpad* is also

used to describe the derailing of trains to prevent the transportation of black labourers from the townships to their jobs in the cities and mines. At the same time, the poem ends with Mkize getting his punishment, not from the law, but from his girlfriend, "uSis Jane", who has kicked him out of the house for trying to sell her tortoise. Mkize becomes homeless, unemployed, and broke, mocked for his country ways and speech. Sepamla often uses this humorous tone to mock the white man or to describe the daily subversive acts of people living in Soweto.

In contrast to Sepamla, Mongane Wally Serote uses both slang and obscenities for a subversive, angry, and revolutionary tone.[44] "What's In This Black 'Shit'" is designed to be linguistically and ideologically subversive. Moreover, Serote desires not only to be subversive but also to assert his linguistic independence directly in the face of authority.[45] Language for Serote has become a measure of rebellion. The use of obscenities to the pass officer marks a movement towards the freedom of the mind and the freedom from both the pass laws and the censorship acts.[46] The "shit" also cuts through the pass officer's bureaucratic language, his "endorsement" of the narrator to Middleburg as though the narrator was a posted parcel. Although it is not beautiful language, its effects are calculated. If nothing else, Serote has helped to liberate South African poetry from the tyranny of "elevated language."

Since 1976, poetry groups have sprung up in the

township and there has been an increase of poetry written in "'murdered' English, formally inelegant and politically indiscreet." Nevertheless, Anne McClintock notes that this poetry is reaching "a far wider audience in South Africa than ever before, posing an unsettling threat to the legitimacy of white settler aesthetics on South African soil...."[47] The subversive language of this poetry has not only undermined the white liberal tradition, but has also created its own niche in the politically-sensitive cultural atmosphere of South Africa.

Oxford English and street-slang English are not the only linguistic elements of the South African culture; Afrikaans also has an impact upon the poetry. The Afrikaans literary journal, *Standpunte*, publishes almost exclusively in Afrikaans. Just as the white English-speakers argue for the purity of their language, so too do the Afrikaners fight for the cultural purity of their language. Breyten Breytenbach argues that the ideology of apartheid has poisoned the Afrikaans language so that, in the besmirching of others, the Afrikaans language "becomes filthy jargon."[48] Terms such as *kaffier, hotnot, koelie, houtkip, outa, aia, jong, meid, klong, skepsel* have become offensive, much in the way as "nigger" became an offensive term in North America. Furthermore, a pidgin language called "kitchen-kaffir" combines Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, and English, and developed out of the master-servant dealings of the Afrikaners and the English with their black workers.[49]

The combining of different languages in this way counteracts the attempts to keep Afrikaans a "pure" language; it prevents linguistic apartheid from becoming absolute and it challenges the authority of one language over the other languages which permeate the consciousness of South Africans, especially educated, radical South Africans.

Black South Africans associate the Afrikaans language with the language of oppression. On June 16, 1976, a protest march began in Soweto over a ruling that black children were to be taught arithmetic and social studies in Afrikaans, "the language of the white cabinet minister, soldier, and pass official, prison guard, and policeman."[50] Although Afrikaners like Breyten Breytenbach are famous for writing poems in protest against apartheid, the Afrikaners are actively engaged in the struggle to retain their cultural and political ascendancy by controlling the language in which children are educated, and, through the language, the ideas which they are taught.[51]

The final linguistic elements in South African poetry are the languages and subdialects of various black Africans. Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Venda, and Shangane are the main languages, although there are many sub-languages. For example, Xhosa is divided into the dialects of the Gcalekas, Dlambes, Hlubis, and the Mpondos.[52] All these groups have traditions of oral poetry which have the two common functions of propagating communal values and of commemorating specific events within the history of the

tribe.[53] In the last few decades, modern South African poets have turned to vernacular poetry for inspiration. For example, Xhosa poetry is strongly lyrical and exploits the uses of concrete imagery.[54] However, Zulu is the most common language exploited. Both Mazisi Kunene and Oswald Mtshali write in Zulu as well as in English. For Mtshali, writing in Zulu is as essential to his cultural identity as writing in English is to his political one:

> Wherever I go I try to collect the debris of my shattered culture and try to immortalize it in my poetry. ... I write in English for my present state of reality or unreality and I write in Zulu to establish my identity which will be translated by posterity.[55]

By re-establishing himself as a Zulu poet rather than as an English poet, Mtshali is recreating a culture ideologically different from white culture, with different values. Moreover, the two primary forms of Zulu poetry, the heroic epic and the praise poem,[56] have been retrieved by these poets. On the other hand, as Kunene says in an interview with Alex la Guma, "I am not concerned with the sloganizing of the Zulu empire,"[57] nor is Kunene obsessed with the Zulus' past glories. Instead, these poets are interested in a living culture, which links teaching and song, rhythm and incantation, poetry and music in a culture which black poets can finally claim as distinctly their own.

The debate between the liberal tradition and African traditions is intensified by increasingly stringent censorship and by a sense of urgency, especially amongst black poets. Black intellectuals, says Anne McClintock,

must choose between indirectly supporting the cultural establishment or joining the ascendant revolutionary class.[58] Criticism of the political ideology and of the language of South African poetry has created a dialogue between Western and African aesthetic values and between white liberalism and black militancy. Nevertheless, the colour bar is not as important in determining the poem's political stance as are its linguistic make-up and its subject matter. Writing in English, and in a particular kind of English, is politically distinct from writing in Afrikaans, or Zulu. Moreover, the subject matter, whether prison experience, exile, or life in the black townships, makes the type of English used, BBC or slang, lyrical or crude, an important factor in how these realities are represented in poetry. Linguistic flexibility aids in the rejection of certain white values, and in the recreation of a black critical standard, suited to the indigenous culture of South Africa. Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Cosmo Pieterse, Sipho Sepamla, Wopko Jensma, and Oswald Mtshali, among others, attempt to produce politically and culturally meaningful poetry. While such poetry cannot remove all traces of the English liberal tradition from South African writing, it does challenge white cultural imperialism, and it can produce a new literature committed to the restructuring of South African society.

Chapter Two

Robben Island: Prison, Prisoners, and Poetry

> Robben Island results from some geographical accident that separated a small piece of Africa from the mainland. ... A huge question mark hangs about the Island; sometimes it seems to shine brightly on the walls of the cells, or dangles over the heads of the prisoners. ... The prisoners seek an answer to it: whither Robben Island? Whither Makana Island? You, Island, are a damned ship sailing the dangerous seas, through the typhoon. But you have souls on board, bondmen of the slave-ship, chained to the benches even during engagements with enemy ships.[1]

Robben Island, also called Makana Island, is a maximum-security penal island occupied mostly by political prisoners. Its most famous inmates include Nelson Mandela and the Rivonia group,[2] the poet Dennis Brutus, and the novelist-poet D.M. Zwelonke. Although numerous mainland prisons also hold political prisoners under similar or worse living conditions than those on Robben Island,[3] for most South African writers the island symbolizes the physical, mental, and spiritual prison which the apartheid State imposes upon its citizens. The island became a prison in 1962, after serving as a leper colony for many years. However, its penal history goes back to the nineteenth century, when the Xhosa leader Makana the Left-Handed was banished to the island by the British. According to legend, he drowned trying to escape.[4] The island's prisoners are tormented by ants, antarctic winds, work in the stone quarry, and numerous forms of torture.[5] Despite the prison's barbarity, it is also nicknamed the "Mandela

University"[6] since the prisoners encourage the exchange of political ideas, poetry, music, plays, and other intellectual pursuits, amongst themselves.

Although prison regulations try to prevent the inmates from singing, reciting poetry, and debating politics, such activities continue, and, along with hunger-strikes, become the prisoners' main fount of resistance. In an attempt to enforce silence, the warders stifle the prisoners' literary creativity with punitive measures such as solitary confinement, "spare-diet" or "meal-stop".[7] Nonetheless, despite restrictions, interrogations, torture, and humiliations, political prisoners have more privileges than regular criminals.[8] The surveillance of political prisoners by the warders, family and friends, the press, and various international agencies, like the Red Cross, partially protect the politicals from sodomy, *tsotsi* violence, ritual cannibalism, and from simple disappearance.[9] Moreover, "politicals", especially writers, have skills to trade for food, cigarettes, and information. For instance, in exchange for reading the poetry of one of the prison cooks, Breyten Breytenbach received sugar and extra food.[10] Although the political prisoner distrusts the average prisoner, whom he sees as a hardened criminal turned informer ("pimp"), and although he tries to remain aloof, he cannot help but observe the effects of apartheid within prison, nor can he refrain from analyzing and recording prison culture and the struggle against dehumanization and

irrationality.

The themes of irrationality and dehumanization permeate all South African prison literature. The horrific conditions under which prisoners must try to preserve some fragments of self, dignity, and independence of thought, place great strain on traditional ideas of identity, justice, and reason. Poetry written in prisons, about prison life, and in honour of the political martyrs still imprisoned, forms a considerable proportion of South African protest poetry. While these poems have no consistent form or technique (they can be descriptive, narrative, or openly didactic), and while they are often tributes to the sufferers rather than condemnations of the torturers, they have clear political goals. Firstly, by describing prison culture, the writer is describing a microcosm of all that is offensive about an apartheid society.[11] Secondly, by pointing out the injustices of prison, the writer creates an impetus for change.[12] Thirdly, by individualizing the sufferers as martyrs, as D.M. Zwelonke and Breyten Breytenbach do, the poet can create sympathy for the human being isolated and in pain. Alternatively, the poet can recreate the suffering of the prisoners as a collective group unjustly denied freedom and dignity, as Anthony Delius, Oswald Mtshali, and Dennis Brutus do, in order to create sympathy for the martyred segment of a society. Thus, prison poetry can be intensely personal, or socially instructive, but it always presents a desperate power

struggle between the defenders of freedom, human dignity, and rational thinking, and a repressive government intent on preserving white supremacy.

D.M. Zwelonke's lyrical novel, ***Robben Island***, describes in chilling detail the degradation of the human spirit and the perversion of the rational mind. The novel centers around three men: Bekimpi, a resistance leader who escapes isolation and torture through madness and death, Thabo, a tubercular poet, reciting his despair in the face of the irrationality of the system, and Danny, a young political who goes "to school" at the "University of Makana" and studies mathematics, literature, judo, and prison culture. The novel ends with Thabo's six-page eulogy for Bekimpi with an ironic tribute to the irrational:

> The burning alcohol spirits were never bitter
> For the drunkard to forsake.
> It is heavenly for the pig to wallow in the filth;
> It is heavenly for it to wallow in the mud
> Of its dung and urine and vomit.[13]

The catalogue of the poet's disgust with filth, mud, dung, urine, and vomit juxtaposes the drunkard's addiction to "burning alcohol" and the pig's addiction to filth. The drunkard is dehumanized; he is transmuted into the pig by accepting, even relishing, the things that destroy his rational mind. While the warders try to turn the prisoners into animals, the prisoners try to reverse the process. In an *ad hoc* performance of ***Animal Farm***, the prisoners present their warders as the pigs in Orwell's representation of a

totalitarian state. The prisoners defend their sense of a human identity by denying the humanity of their tormentors.

Despite the warders' attempt to break down the prisoners' will-power, Thabo sees the rational man as having two choices: he must either avoid the irrational minds trying to destroy him, or confront them.

> But then, if a rational man confronts
> With an irrational man,
> He has got the choice to avoid the irrational man
> Or be swallowed.
> But if an irrational man comes to your home
> And spits on the threshold,
> Or comes and defecates on the floor,
> Or urinates in the sink,
> In your own home,
> To rid yourself of the plague
> Bash his jaws or die.[14]

In South Africa the rational man is surrounded by the irrationality of apartheid. "Thought," laments Thabo, "is pigmented".[15] The irrationality of the state is upheld by the irrationality of its individual members. The rational are swallowed by prison. However, Thabo views the most insidious effect of apartheid as being the ease with which irrationality enters into the minds of the rational. While he cannot hope to convert the irrational mind to rational thinking, Thabo struggles to sanctify his individual integrity against the currents of irrational thought. As Thabo recites his poem to an audience of roughly two hundred fellow prisoners, he is met with silence. From each man there emerges a silent tribute to Thabo and a desire to retain individual freedom of thought.[16]

While Zwelonke records experience inside the prison,

poets like Anthony Delius[17] who are onlookers of the island drama, also isolate confusion, fear, and insanity as the legacy of Robben Island. Delius describes how the island appears to someone standing on a "Whites Only" beach.

> It has held degradadoes, visonaries,
> patriots, Makana drowned on the other shore;
> it has known history's, time's ocean's refuse,
> madness, too, but none like this final fear
> in which the more confused appoint the keepers
> and the law's flail lays the mind's bone bare.[18]

To the outsider familiar with the history of Robben Island, it is not the horror of what goes on inside the prison which is most terrifying. Instead, the final fear is of the irrationality of the authorities, of the legislators, who have created the island prison visible from the privileged luxury of an all white-beach. The tormentor is madder than his victims, whom he tries to strip of all rational defenses.

For Dennis Brutus, however, the nightmare of Robben Island is not simply an abstract contemplation, as it is for Delius, nor is it a battle against the irrationality of the warders and their superiors. Instead, for Brutus, the whole environment of Robben Island is hostile. The poet's horror is inscribed in the images of blood, metal, and rock. In "Robben Island Sequence," the description of the rocks on the beach carries "the threat of death."[19] Everything in the prisoner's environment is threatening to destroy him. He is alienated from the rocky ground on which he walks and from the air he breathes. Every item listed is a knife or

sharp instrument which pierces the prisoner's body and mind. Brutus responds with raw emotion to the island;[20] his anger, pain, and fear are exposed; his mind is as vulnerable to his desolate surroundings as his bare feet are to the shards of broken slate.

Nonetheless, despite the tone of despair, the poet does not lose sight of his poem's aesthetic qualities. T.T. Moyana argues that Brutus's relatively short prison term created "'jagged bits' of emotional turmoil, with all the raw anguish of a fighter, but little art...."[21] However, Brutus's vivid imagery is not a weakness but a poetic strength. Through his rejection of lengthy grammatical structures, and of formal versification, Brutus creates an emotional description of the daily atmosphere of hatred and violence. Moreover, his choice of language intensifies for the reader the daily brutalization of the normal spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities of Robben Island's victims. The art created by South African prison culture is jagged and emotional because they spring from jagged and emotional experiences. The poems are shaped and defined by the experiences from which they have emerged.

Brutus describes poetry as "a technique or strategy of persuasion."[22] In order for the poetry to communicate effectively, it must express itself simply and directly, without ornament or pretension. Although Brutus has the political aim of exposing the alienating effects of prison on human beings, he views nothing that is human as being

alien to poetry.[23] Thus, while all his poetry is not a didactic attack on the evil of Robben Island, his experiences there affect the style in which all of his poetry is written.[24] Brutus controls his language and uses repeated images to distill the emotional torment which unites the prisoners and accentuates the inhumanity of the forces which oppose them. This style is both technically effective and emotionally affecting.

Brutus's most famous prison poems were written after his release from Robben Island, and while he was under house arrest.[25] Banned from publishing, Brutus wrote a series of poem-letters to his sister-in-law, Martha. In one letter he narrates the story of two prisoners, one who gives up smoking so that he cannot be bribed with cigarettes, and one who goes insane. Both men are united by a desire to avoid "the pressures to enforce sodomy."[26] Brutus maintains a carefully neutral tone in the poem and allows the men's reactions to this aspect of prison life to reach the reader unembellished. Other poems merely catalogue the destructive and degenerative activities of "Coprophilism; necrophilism; fellatio; / penis-amputation...."[27] Brutus realizes that even scientific terminology does not allow him to distance himself from his feelings of being personally tainted.

Even his attempts to transcend the dehumanizing prison and to meditate on the birds, the clouds, or the stars are prevented by the tiny windows or blocked out by the sounds of the anxious guards as they patrol the machine-gun

station.[28] By maintaining short lines, brief stanzas, and a precise use of scientific and logical terminology, Brutus exposes the government's attempt to justify rationally the treatment prisoners receive. By deliberately understating the horrific nature of his experience, Brutus convinces the outsider of the accuracy of his descriptions. Moreover, his tone in *Letters to Martha* is always rational although his narratives often reveal his emotional turmoil. However, he acknowledges that his rational discourse cannot adequately articulate his longing for freedom and for recognition of the suffering of the political prisoners who have been silenced.

> This is the wordless ultimate ballistic
> Impacting past Reason's, Science's logistics
> To blast the heart's defensive mechanism[29]

Even the most rational of discourses cannot successfully encompass the devastation of the human heart. Brutus attempts to speak about the unspeakable, to compose poems about the seemingly unpoetic, and to assert the humanity of the seemingly dehumanized.

Of all South African poets who write about their prison experiences, the most famous both within and without South Africa is Breyten Breytenbach. Because of his unique position as a poet who writes in Afrikaans, Breytenbach received special dispensation to continue writing while in prison.[30] In *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach summarizes the effects that writing under

surveillance, without access to any of his previous writings, and under the threat of confiscation, had upon his poetry.

> In the dark I am not in the way. There is nobody to look over my shoulder. ... And I would start writing. Like launching a black ship on a dark sea. I write: I am the writer. I am doing my black writing with my no-colour gloves and my dark glasses on, stopping every once in a while, passing my sheathed hand over the page to feel the outlines and the imprints of letters which have no profile. It makes for a very specific kind of wording, perhaps akin to the experiments that the surrealists used to make in earlier years.[31]

Writing in prison is two-edged. On the one hand, Breytenbach can experiment; he can free-associate and perhaps create something which will redefine what it is to write and be a writer. By writing in the darkness, he is able to take on a persona without colour, a persona not limited by racial perspectives. Through the act of writing Breytenbach establishes his identity as a writer. Nevertheless, writing alone is not sufficiently self-reflexive; *he must write that he is writing.* He must also write that he is the subject of his writing.[32] Only for as long as he can keep writing can Breytenbach assert his identity as writer.

On the other hand, Breytenbach is separated from his writing, since he must write at night, without light. Writing becomes mysterious even for the writer. The glove metaphor reveals not only Breytenbach's ability to take up several subject positions but it also reveals how he is

divided from his words. They are black because he cannot see them to interpret them; he cannot control the direction which they take or edit them. In exchange for the ability to perform the act of writing, Breytenbach has given up his identity as author insofar as he cannot be certain that what he writes is characteristic of the discourse he has established elsewhere in his poetry.[33] Intellectually, Breytenbach can have little control over a writing he cannot perceive:

> Since *one* cannot re-read what *you've* written a certain continuity is imposed on you. You have to let go. You must follow. You allow yourself to be carried forward by the pulsation of the words as they surface in the paper. *You are the paper.* Punctuation goes by the board. Repetitions, rhythms, structures, these will be nearly biological. Not intellectually conceived. Ponder for two beats and you're lost.[34] [Italics are mine.]

Breytenbach changes from "I" to "you". The shift in pronoun reference signals a division of identity. Acknowledging that his writing creates his identity, he changes from being the subject of his discourse to being subjected to it. Moreover, his identity is what he inscribes on the paper. The writing is not structured by Breytenbach's rational mind, but, according to his own perception, by his intuitive surrender to some organic order. Breytenbach's writing constitutes an alternative reality to Pretoria Central Prison. He can escape from a hostile environment and through poetry, rhythm, and language re-establish an identity as the man who writes as opposed to the man incarcerated in jail.

The problem of Breytenbach's split self is only partially resolved in the text. During the seven years he spent in prison, the authorities daily confiscated his writings and placed them under protective custody. Upon release, his papers were returned to him. Fragmentary, disorganized, incomplete, these prison writings needed to be turned into a text in which structure and unity are once more incorporated. Free from prison, Breytenbach reasserts his identity as author, editor, and reviser. However, he is also faced with the problem within the collected writings of a split subject: the writer and the prisoner. As an author, Breytenbach must try to reconcile the two. As a result, part of *True Confessions* involves Breytenbach the writer avoiding his identity as prisoner, while another part of the text deals with Breytenbach the author seeking out his prison memories to reconstitute his identity as prisoner.

One of the ways in which he seeks to rediscover the prisoner is through an obsession with explaining prison language, especially the language of address. Breytenbach recalls the violent response a prisoner received when he addressed a warder as *meneer* (sir) rather than as *baas* (master).[35] The prison guards partly maintain their authority linguistically, through a rigidity of address. In contrast, the prisoners have lost their certainty of self. Moreover, as the number of subject positions which a prisoner can occupy multiplies, so too do the forms in which they can be addressed multiply. Breytenbach catalogues a

long list of slang terms which designate the political, social, and sexual status of a prisoner both within prison society and without. A few of the terms of address he lists are:

> You have *roebane* (robbers) and *trassies* (transvestites...), and 'grubbies' (gluttons, those who go digging in the rubbish bins for throw-away food) and *howwe* (the lot taken to court) and 'Hard labours' (sentenced inmates) and 'coats' who are *langanas* (long-timers) ... and *rokers* (pot smokers). ...
>
> In general we, the prisoners, were known in the Cape as *bandiete* or *mugus* or *skebengas* or *skollies*. The warders remained as ever, *boere*.[36]

The ever-increasing, ever-finer distinctions, between prisoners results from an attempt to circumvent anonymity and to combat the process of dehumanization. The warders, who have absolute power in the prison, encounter no such split in identity or multiplication of address.

Since the prisoner is faced with a completely different social order from the one he faces outside, he must learn a new grammar, a new structure, and one which is based on institutionalized white violence. Breytenbach links the prisoner's crisis of identity to a crisis in language. His 1976 prison poem, "The Struggle for the Taal,"[37] relates how the South African authorities use the Afrikaans language as a tool of cultural hegemony in order to engrain violence into the culture. Although this poem encompasses all aspects of an apartheid society, it also denotes the specific prison language and the brutality of prison life. Both Afrikaans and prison language authorize the violence of

prison. However, Breytenbach also acknowledges that a structure which incorporates violence is prone to self-destruction. The "stuttering" of firearms refers both to the noise that a repeating revolver or machine gun makes and to the break-down of a destructive grammar or syntax into repetitious and incomprehensible syllables. A language which communicates violence cannot help but deteriorate into confusion and incomprehension. Order and irrationality cannot successfully cohabit for long, even in a South African prison.

In contrast to the way Afrikaans is used to endorse violence, Oswald Mtshali celebrates gentleness by using the structure of Zulu praise poetry in "A Song for South Africa."[38] The poem turns away from the brutality and irrationality of the prison and, instead, begins with a chorus of players[39] praising Mandela, Sisulu,[40] and others still on Robben Island, "the island of heroes." The refrain, "we remember you," delivers a tribute to the prisoners' determination and endurance which is coloured by a tone of bitterness. Mtshali describes these victims of apartheid in agricultural imagery:

> The singers hummed their song of praise,
> glorifying the black calves tethered
> with leather thongs to the Island near Cape Town,
> where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic.
> ...how long will the Red-bellied iguana
> and the White-footed warthog stay
> ensconced in our Kraal,
> where they entered by sheer elephantine force
> and pruned the lushness of our fields and the grasslands,
> and wrung the udder of our Milk-Cow Africa,
> the paragon of bovine docility,

whose teats exude endless treasures?

The prisoners are praised for their docility; they represent patience and a series of values in opposition to those of the warthogs, the whites. Moreover, the inmates of Robben Island are like Africa itself, oppressed and robbed of their life-generating treasures. Mtshali's view of the situation is neither barren and despairing like that of Zwelonke and Brutus, nor is it distantly outraged like that of Delius. The island is visualized as the place where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic, the place where the divisions between blacks and whites end. Rather then portraying the harsh antarctic winds which blast the island, Mtshali describes oceans teeming with life: dolphins, porpoises, and swordfishes.[41] While there is life, Mtshali sees hope that freedom will come to the "Beloved children of Africa."[42] Moreover, Mtshali's tone turns from its early bitterness to humour, as he portrays the whites as iguanas and warthogs forcing their way into the *kraals* (cattle corrals) belonging to the Africans. The whites have entered the Africans' land by force.

Mtshali's poem offers South Africans an almost mythic promise of release from suffering, separation, and sorrow. Through the rural imagery, the poem incorporates a vision of harmony with nature, of the healing of wounds to the body and mind, and of Mandela's return from the island of heroes. Mtshali also uses structures and syntaxes from Zulu praise poetry in affirmation of the positive aspects of African

culture and in rejection of European cultural oppression. The mythic significance of the milk-cow allows the poem to transcend the moment of humiliation, blood, and fear. Instead, the poem links the richness of Africa's past with a promise of a glorious return to freedom and abundance in the near future.

Poetry written for and about prisoners, or poetry written in prison, provides a record of the degradation, despair, and fear of people whose physical and mental anguish are accentuated by their struggle against the irrationality of apartheid. Zwelonke, Delius, Brutus, Breytenbach, and Mtshali protest the brutality and injustice of the authorities who have created the atmosphere of oppression and hate. The form in which the protest is undertaken varies with each poet and his cultural, political, or intellectual bias. They are united by a cause and by that strange cultural phenomenon they share called Robben Island. The ability of human beings to manipulate language into alternative constructions of reality and of self, and the ability to write, sing, or recite poetry coherently and continuously, prevents prison from being an effective means of silencing South Africans. Instead the conditions and techniques employed to dehumanize and to break the will-power of people like Mandela or Breytenbach have produced a new impetus to speak out. What has emerged is a body of poetry which reasserts the individual in the

face of suffering, creativity in the midst of despair, and life in the midst of death. Ilva MacKay's poem, "Mandela and all Comrades in prison," encapsulates the continuing struggle in which all prison poetry is involved:

> You are just number 466/64 to them
> sweeping dusty paths,
> tilling and raking the soil of that island
> ...till and rake the soil Mandela
> like your brothers, sisters, sons and daughters
> who toil and sweat for Africa[43]

Chapter Three

"By the Waters of Babylon": Poems of Exile

By the waters of Babylon
the brackish wastes of alienness
lie like dust on heart and throat,
contour and curve of hill and field
unspeaking and meaningless
as a barbarous foreign tongue[1]

Dennis Brutus, in his poem "By the Waters of Babylon," uses a wasteland motif to narrate his frustrated attempt to communicate in a foreign landscape. He succeeds in reproducing the alienation and confusion felt by all exiles in an unfamiliar place. While the specific motivation for leaving South Africa varies, the poet's exile is usually a result of his political, and not his poetic, activities.[2] Whatever the poet's political views, however, almost all poems written in exile have similar strengths and weaknesses as well as common themes and approaches. Most poems of exile emerge out of a tension between homesickness for Africa and a desire for political freedom. They combine a metaphysical vision of time with a nostalgia for the African scenery. Poems of exile often swing between hope for a triumphant return and despair at continuing absence, between love for South Africa, and hatred for the apartheid system, and between a call for action and spiritual malaise.

While poets like Arthur Nortje expose their personal anguish, others like Dennis Brutus impose upon their poetry a political message. However, the exiled poet, whatever his bias, banned in South Africa, has little voice at home and

can be certain of reaching only a very limited audience of fellow exiles. Moreover, the longer the poet is in exile, the more his poetry begins to differ from the poetry of his native land and the more he adopts the aesthetics and philosophical assumptions prevalent abroad. The alienation and despair of the exiled poet is reinforced by the angst of modern Western literature. "Thus," says Lewis Nkosi, "into their conversation without thinking about it very much, creep notions of alienation and metaphysical despair, all of which have no immediate relevance to the hungry millions of Africa."[3] Distance and time increase the gulf between black experience at home and abroad; fragile contacts are lost. Although often moving or deeply personal, poetry of exile also expresses the poets' frustration at the barriers which prevent meaningful communication with the people *for* whom they write, but *to* whom they cannot write.

The early poems of Dennis Brutus explore the world of the troubadour, the wandering poet-minstrel of medieval French romances. At first, Brutus treats exile as an world-wide adventure, or as a romantic struggle to prove his worth as a freedom fighter. He identifies with the troubadour who is separated from his beloved (South Africa) and who will compose songs, fight chivalrously, travel extensively so that he might prevail over his enemies. For example:

> A troubadour, I traverse all my land
> exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest
> ...

Thus quixoting till a cast-off of my land
I sing and fare, person to loved-one pressed....[4]

* * *

I will be the world's troubadour
if not my country's
...
Being what I am
a compound of speech and thoughts and song
and girded by indignation...
surely I may be
this cavalier?[5]

* * *

I *am* the exile
am the wanderer
the troubadour
(whatever they say)[6]

These excerpts from three poems, written between 1963 and 1978, show a striking consistency of theme and of the poet's identification with the minstrel-knight. Although *the troubadour* is invested with wholly positive values, there is also an ironic undercutting of the elements of romance. While he valiantly traverses the land, he is also comically quixotic. Moreover, while he seeks to identify himself with the world, he is rejected by his native country. He girds himself for battle, but only for a battle of words. Since the poet is so closely linked to the troubadour, he seeks his identity through language and music and through association with a righteous cause. However, his self-confidence dwindles to a question mark as he becomes uncertain as to how to act in his chosen role. In "I *am* the exile," he begins forcefully but is undermined by his own parenthetical statement which points to the mutablity of his identity and which questions the strength of his commitment

by introducing the critical "they." What begins as a romantic yearning ends in dark uncertainty.

The troubadour theme is merely one example of how Brutus's poetry has been influenced by western romance. He also acknowledges the influence of metaphysical poets like John Donne, and that of the nineteenth-century Irish literary revival, especially the early, mystical poetry of Yeats.[7] To Cosmo Pieterse, these influences are manifested by the way Brutus links "the physical, the human body, with the physical of nature. Soul and soil are very often transmuted, fused together."[8] Hope, renewal, and return to South Africa are captured in a moment of transcendence in which earth and sky unite, and in which the material accomplishments of mankind are viewed as miraculous precursors of a moral triumph over evil.

> Now that we conquer and dominate time
> hurtling imperious from the sun's laggard slouch
> ...how shall we question that further power
> waits for a leap across gulfs of storm[9]

Brutus's interest in time reflects a metaphysical view. Time is the enemy because it leads to death and decay rather than to positive change. However, if time can be manipulated and harnessed, perhaps a positive outcome can be achieved. Combined with this transcendence of time is awe for modern technology. The jet airplane which allows Brutus to escape South Africa also seems to outrun time, and points to the power of human beings to overcome their limitations. If time and space can be conquered, then so too can man overturn the evils of apartheid.

Unfortunately for Brutus, the conquering of time is illusory. For the exile, time passes slowly and unfruitfully. The inability to affect the course of events at home, or to communicate with those left behind, or even to influence those abroad, saps the exile of hope. Brutus uses a dead beetle's empty exoskeleton to describe the hollowness of the exile's despair:

> --with the images of beetles' empty cases
> thin, sharp-edged and brittle
> slim black crackling blades--
> Sherds![10]

The poet's vision, already made brittle and hollow by unfulfillment, is shattered like the "sherds" of a broken pot. As his spiritual malaise grows, Brutus accuses himself of egotism and self-aggrandisement brought about by his loneliness and his isolation from the practical realities of apartheid.[11] Distanced from South Africa, he cannot live up to his *alter ego*, the dynamic troubadour. Instead, the poet slowly learns to accept a passive role as the patient observer. As the haiku "Not in my hands" shows, Brutus realises that

> Not in my hands
> is the clay
> of my life[12]

The exiled man waits for others to fulfill his vision, to shape the clay of life into a meaningful structure. Patience, however, is battered when the passage of time refuses to yield positive growth, and results in "A long agony of passion / ... that wrought stone dream and marble flower"[13] out of the seeds of hope.

Despite the tendency to despair, Brutus's poetry does not become increasingly submerged in pessimism and self-doubt. Nadine Gordimer, for instance, observes that "Brutus seems to have drawn strength from the 'bitter bread of exile' and to have developed his gifts, fully, if perhaps differently from the way he might have at home."[14] In fact, by turning a critical eye on the South African landscape, Brutus regains a sense of purpose. By combining his political ambitions with his poetic talents, he can comment creatively on his African past. The deliberate vagueness of "The impregnation of our air," which describes a growing militarism among Africans as a "miasma,"[15] counterbalances the homesickness for the jarcarandas in "Sequence for South Africa."[16] With the stony resolve of "There are no people left in my country,"[17] Brutus uses an intense awareness of the landscape of Africa to make his point. In an interview with William E. Thompson, Brutus explains that

> South Africa is a landscape in which you cannot escape the politics. ...it seems to me you have to deal with your landscape, and that's *my* kind of landscape.[18]

Although exiled, Brutus retains a strong love for the landscape of South Africa while he maintains an active dislike of the policies enacted by the Nationalist Government. The tension between these two permeates much of Brutus' poetry, creating its strong self-awareness and reinforcing its African rhythms. For example, "In my part of the world," tension is built through the simple repetition of the word "Africa."[19] At first, the poet

narrows his topic to a single location, South Africa. Thus, "Africa" is reduced to a single signified. However, in the second half of the stanza, Africa is no longer just a place; it becomes an idea. Each repetition of "Africa" picks up new meanings as it changes from a greeting to a signifier of solidarity. The tension between the opening movement to fix one meaning, and the closing movement to create a multiplicity of meanings is reinforced by the repetition of syntactical units. Because "Africa" always closes the lines, each new meaning is further emphasized. No uncertainties undermine the unity of political ideology and well-balanced poetry here.

After tallying Brutus's strengths and weakness as a political poet writing under the pressures of exile, one realises that his most prominent weakness remains his lack of an audience. Although Brutus's early poems in ***Sirens, Knuckles, Boots***, were written with a particular person or function in mind, his later poems lack an established audience.[20] A sense of alienation from people and places forms the focus of "I am alien in Africa and everywhere."[21] He is both disdainful of European arrogance and hypocrisy and frustrated by the restrictions, including the banning of his poetry, he faces in Africa. In the end, he turns to his fellow exiles, Cosmo Pieterse, Alex la Guma, Es'kia Mphahlele, and others for an alliance of outcasts.[22] Not only do they share a hatred of apartheid and a love of Africa, but they have similar backgrounds in the European

classics. Only between themselves can they reach a fully empathic audience.

Alvarez-Pereyre points out further the problems caused by a limited audience. "For Brutus and Pieterse," he states:

> exile eliminated a real public; the poet soliloquizes, speaking aloud of his love for his distant homeland, speaking *of* his people but not *to* his people. The elevated nature of his views and his generosity are as much reflections of his personality as they are of his humanist education and his reading of the classics.[23]

The poet has no standard but his own; he cannot escape personal indulgence. His experiences in exile temper his memories of South Africa, but he no longer shares in the everyday experiences of apartheid. If exile, as Cosmo Pieterse suggests, can affect the poet's vision, style, range and diction,[24] how effective can his poetry be in communicating a message which is more personal than political, more concerned with the emotions of the exiled than with motivating an audience to action?

Cosmo Pieterse's poems, like those of Brutus, are heavily inundated with Western influences, concerns, and motifs while retaining a definite African bias. Alvarez-Pereyre argues that "time" is a major element in Pieterse's poems:

> Pieterse's poems often refer to Time and to change: germination, shoots, flowers, fruit and above all, the berry, the perfect shape, containing both the finite and the promise of future creation.[25]

For Pieterse time allows for positive change; hope is not

undermined by impatience or uncertainty. Unlike Brutus, Pieterse does not perceive time as the enemy, but as that part of nature which enables him to transcend separation from his beloved South Africa.

In "Love Exile Land," Pieterse addresses Africa as his lover, in much the same way that Brutus does in his troubadour poems. However, the dominant images are of birds and flowers; the dominant movements are flight and growth.[26] Pieterse's motherly protective thoughts lead to a dream flight home. For Pieterse the dream supersedes waking reality and creates its own moment in time in which it is possible to escape exile. The transference of his dream to the social world results in temporary wish-fulfillment. As with Brutus, solidarity and the common goal ultimately create a benevolent future. The optimism is moving, but the emphasis is on poetic elevation rather than on deep meaning. The fact that South Africa is not listening to him, and cannot listen to him, seems of little importance to the vision. Although Africa remains the goal, Pieterse's poetry is heavily European in its tone, metaphors, and delivery, and these undermine the authority of its vision.

In contrast to both Brutus and Pieterse, other exiles write almost exclusively of their personal despair and isolation. Although Brutus expresses feelings of self-doubt and homesickness, he is able to turn his energies outwards to politically-oriented poetry. Cosmo Pieterse uses his

love of words to create poetry of hope and renewal. Other exiled poets, however, are less concerned with external events or pleasant fantasies than they are with their own spiritual malaise. Perhaps the most intense of these is Arthur Nortje. His obsession with his own isolation from meaningful human contact is only accentuated by exile. Very rarely, argues Alvarez-Pereyre, are Nortje's poems of the early sixties not "indelibly marked by 'I suffered under Verwoerd!'."[27] What Nortje suffers from is one of the most vicious and subtle side-effects of apartheid: that of the barriers imposed against meaningful and spontaneous human contact. Once in exile, he is unable to overcome the alienation begun at home. Words, sentences, all human utterance, are constricted by authoritarian forces:

> but these broken sentences
> stumble to heaven on the hill despite
> the man with the whip who beats my
> emaciated words back[28]

Although Nortje tries for inspired verse, his words hunger for an audience and suffer under the censor's hand. Coherence is damaged by enforced isolation.

Lewis Nkosi, in *Home and Exile*, points out the psychological exile created by the apartheid system even before actual physical exile occurs:

> To be a black South African is to be both unspeakably rich and incredibly poor; and also, it means to live in perpetual exile from oneself, which is worse, since to know who one is today one must be able to relate oneself in a dynamic manner to what one was yesterday.[29]

Nortje's poetry reveals the desperate searching of one

individual for contact and understanding. Cut off from a cultural or historical sense of self-worth, exiled from family and friends, Nortje describes an increasing alienation from his own thoughts. For Nortje, exile goes beyond even Nkosi's pronouncement. Instead, exile becomes an "alienation of temperament unable to form lasting personal relationships."[30] The composing of poetry is merely one attempt to end the unbearable silence and to communicate his need for conversation and companionship.

Nortje's poems expose his "hyperintrospective" nature,[31] as he delves into the themes of madness, LSD trips, alcohol abuse, and the search for oblivion from pain.[32] His lines are often fragmentary and diffuse; sometimes they are even incomprehensible. His personal anguish, however, is poignantly and tragically portrayed. In "The long silence," speech is strangled by "death and removals" and desires have "faded away like a bland murmur." In their place:

> New developments
> filter in
> or even you with measured love
> may break my tone of no response:
> the loveless essence
> remains the empty
> nights and years, husks of the exile.[33]

Like Brutus, Nortje represents exile as a shell. His empty and loveless isolation is not relieved by a sense of positive change. Unlike Brutus, Nortje does not perceive time as conquerable, and unlike Pieterse, Nortje cannot pass time by waiting hopefully for the fruition of his dream.

Instead, time is a monotonous reminder of Nortje's growing silence and despair.

The poem concludes grimly, with the following stanza:

> The soul has left
> its slim volume
> of acrid poems only.
> Faint smoke is a sharper reminder
> of fire and life than agile tongues.
> Stench leaks from the gloomy tomb of treasure.

Rather than finding comfort in poetry or dreams as Brutus and Pieterse do, Nortje's poems only reinforce his bitterness. They do not create a needed relief from silence; in fact, they are seen as a burning effigy permeating the tomb of the already poisoned and soulless poet. Regeneration is not possible for Nortje; death becomes the only relief possible.

Arthur Nortje killed himself on December 8, 1970 shortly before he was to be deported from England back to South Africa. Like many writers in exile, he was caught between the inability to act and the intensity of his emotions. André Brink describes the price which the exile pays for asylum:

> I've always found it a heart-rending experience to see writers fatally tied to a society and wasting away in a foreign country. They seem to draw no sustenance from their adopted land, sucking dry the experience they grope at through memory. Some overcome this, but for many it is a continuous downhill slide.[34]

Arthur Nortje found exile a downhill slide. Unable to cope with the loneliness of exile and unable to forget the problems of South Africa, Nortje fell into a

self-destructive pattern which his poetry shows. In "Freedom," the title is ironically undercut by the poet's inability to accept the extent of his loneliness -- the price exacted for the freedom of a new country. Instead, he describes himself as haunted by the gods and the devil, unable to reconcile his guilt with his memories and the lack of love in his life. For Nortje,

> The heart is a stone in water.
> Stone pulse up through the swell.
> It seldom manages to aid loneliness.
> There is no man left alive now.[35]

The last line of the stanza has a multiple significance. Not only does it refer to the killings in South Africa, and not only does it refer to the poet's isolation, it also suggests that the poet himself is already dead, his heart having petrified under a flood of loneliness.

Nortje's perception of himself as a walking dead man or empty husk is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of his overall spiritual malaise. He also writes of his disillusionment with his fellow exiles, the people he would logically turn to for companionship and for an audience for his poems. In "Autopsy," Nortje begins with "My teachers are dead men. I was too young / to grasp their anxieties, too nominal an exile". His teachers are soon narrowed to one, who although not specifically named, is obviously Dennis Brutus.[36] That Nortje admires Brutus is obvious from the way in which he describes his masterful presence and his heroic encounters with South African prison guards.[37] However, on meeting Brutus years later in London,

Nortje was disappointed by Brutus' failure to become the voice of the black community:

> The early sharpness passed beyond to noon
> that melted brightly into shards of dusk.
> The luminous tongue in the black world
> has infinite possibilities no longer.[38]

Once again, time is the harbinger of a loss of hope, and the destroyer of "infinite possibilities." The potential leadership of Brutus, which seemed so bright in his youth, has dimmed with middle-age. Nortje can find hope neither within nor without himself. In the end, he submits to the silence of death rather than continuing to speak in broken, disjointed verse.

While Nortje, Brutus, and Pieterse represent the most prolific exiled writers, and perhaps the writers most frustrated by their isolation from an African audience, theirs is not the only perspective on exile. For numerous poets still living in South Africa, like Sipho Sepamla, the damage to South African culture caused by the loss of its exiled poets is overwhelming. Sepamla feels that the current generation of writers, cut off from the banned and exiled writers, suffers from a lack of continuity in its poetic tradition. "I think," says Sepamla in an interview with Stephen Gray,

> it's unfortunate that we are compelled not to continue where they left off. We are compelled to begin, as it were, from the beginning. This means the groping that is taking place is harder and more painful, and I think it's unfortunate that this is the case.[39]

Frustrated by the gulf between him and those poets in exile, Sepamla realises that an irreparable splintering of the voices of South Africa has occurred. The concerns of the exile are foreign to South Africans at home. Moreover, the poets in exile can only write of memories; they lose contact with the actual conditions at home.

In his poem "The Exile," Sepamla addresses the fading memory of an exiled friend. From the little information he gains from newspapers, he learns of his friend's progress in the new world. Exploiting the parable of the prodigal son, Sepamla closes the poem with the promised return:

> Teach at that University of Life while I prepare
> the fatted cow for a son exiled
> for growing too big for his boots![40]

Sepamla's humorous tone neither undercuts his triumphant prediction, nor seems as unrealistic as Pieterse's dream reunion. He promises a healing of the gap between exiled poets and the poets at home without appearing impractical. He also offers the exiles an enthusiastic audience and a reason to keep writing while they are separated by space and time from the object of their discourse.

On March 21, 1975, on the fifteenth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre, numerous exiled poets met for a poetry symposium at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas.[41] The poets included Dennis Brutus, Cosmo Pieterse, Mongane Wally Serote, and Oswald Mtshali. They had an opportunity to read their poems to a willing audience. The silence of

exile was breached, if only for a short time; a divided community was temporarily united. Hope for a positive change in South African politics lessened the sense of isolation and confirmed the commitment to continue the struggle for which they were banned. Several other such symposia have been held before and since, celebrating the poetry of African exiles and the continued voice of protest. In between these meetings, however, distance and the passage of time continue to undermine positive outlooks. The spiritual malaise which helped to destroy Arthur Nortje can only be conquered when these poets are allowed to speak meaningfully to all South Africans. During a panel discussion on contemporary South African poetry, Oswald Mtshali asserted the exile's inability to forsake his homeland:

> One wonders then whether there is any meaningful exile in the sinister sense of abandoning one's cause. There is no such thing, it seems to me ... it is this nostalgia, this consciousness of the predicament of those left back home, this weight of sorrow, this excruciating awareness of the fact that ... there are others who are ... suffering on Robben Island.[42]

Chapter Four

From Sharpeville to Soweto: Township Poetry

Nadine Gordimer views "the colour-line" as the barrier which prevents all writers from creating "a transcending text of the totality of human experience in South Africa...."[1] However, while the gap between black and white experience is perpetrated by the ideological, economic, and physical barriers of a segregated society, literary efforts to expose the gap, and sometimes to close it, have from the 1960's onwards generated a large body of poetry. Sympathetic white publishers, like Mike Kirkwood of Ravan Press, founder of *Staffrider*, have provided new avenues through which poets of all races can share their ideas and experiences. Many white authors, like Gordimer, who wrote the introduction to Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, are also willing to bridge the gap and try to understand the imagery and rhythms of township life.

The gulf between the overcrowded poverty of the black townships, such as Soweto, and the wealth of the white cities, especially Johannesburg and Cape Town, is the focus of much of the writing which evaluates the apartheid system. However, apartheid also influences how black poets are received and evaluated as compared to whites. Most notably, writers disagree over critical terminology; for example, while a white critic might use a term such as "township art" as a description of a certain style of contemporary poetry, to Oswald Mtshali the term seems

patronizing.[2] Mtshali resents the attempt to classify his poetry according to the boundaries which segregate his society, the boundaries against which he protests in his poems. Nonetheless, the vast outpouring of art, music, prose, and poetry make the townships important cultural and political centres, worthy of critical scrutiny. Rather than isolating township poetry from serious critical evaluation, critics must acknowledge that all aspects of daily township life and culture are interrelated, and affect the poetry produced with almost the same impact as violent events like the Sharpeville Massacre and the 1976 Soweto riots.[3]

Not all poetry about township life is written by township inhabitants. C.J. Driver, who lives in exile, and Jennifer Davids, who lives in white Cape Town, write about how they perceive the townships from outside. Driver's "Afternoon in an African Township" is written in memory of the shootings at Langa on the same day as the Sharpeville Massacre.[4] He uses negatives, to echo the type of denial and censorship which allows many whites to escape the reality of the Nationalist government's actions in the townships:

> The streets do not run
> With blood.
> The houses
> Are not burning.
> There are on [sic] children.[5]

While the first two sentences deny the massacre, the last sentence tells the truth: there are no children; they have all been killed. The simple, repetitive syntax quietly

reveals the tragedy to those whom censorship and official propaganda has kept ignorant.

Jennifer Davids' "Location Fires" describes how the actual landscape has to be imagined since the truth is hidden from outsiders:

> Beneath my eyelids
> the landscape is heavy
> the people are buried in ground-
> clinging shapes of houses
>
> From Langa to Nyanga
> the fires are hidden
> the landscape is flattened
> frightened and silenced[6]

For Davids, the devastation of the township is barely imaginable; her vision is obscured, while the landscape itself has been distorted and silenced. As an outsider, Davids can only try to comprehend what she cannot experience and cannot know for certain.

Most township poetry, written in the townships themselves, is either recited for small audiences or published in a handful of literary journals like *Ophir*, *Staffrider*, *Classic*, and *New Classic*.[7] The purpose of these journals is to promote black literature and the ideas of Black Consciousness. Steve Biko, the founder of the South African Students Organization (SASO) and a victim of police torture, adopted the term Black Consciousness to provide "the ideological basis for an emphasis upon unity-in-oppression, for the assertion of 'Black' cultural values, and for a militant expression of 'Black' political

aspirations."[8] In the case of *Staffrider*, Black Consciousness is epitomized by the staffrider figure. The staffrider is "as light-fingered as he is fleet-footed. A skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but ... slightly disreputable."[9] The staffrider is literally someone who rides on the outside of trains to avoid paying the fares or being asked for his pass. Motshile Nthodi's poem, "Staffrider," was published in the first issue of its namesake journal. It describes the excitment and danger of staffriding:

> listen to the shouting
> and whistles
> from the audience in that tube
> when I swing on the outer handle
> and rest on the bottom stair
>
> THAT'S THEATRE HEY
> ...
> railway police chasing me
> I jump the platform
> the railway line
> the fence
> ...
>
> this is the Saturday programme
> and till we meet again
> thank you brothers and sisters,
> thank you.[10]

The good-humoured staffrider assumes the tone of a radio programme announcer or a circus ringmaster. He is the emblem of everyday "subversive" entertainment in which the railway police are viewed as the keystone cops and the staffrider as the dashing hero. Resistance through humour is one of the few alternatives to bitterness and violence still accessible to a black audience.

While oral literature and literature in the vernacular flourishes mostly in the rural "homelands," *ozibongo* or *praise poetry* is sometimes integrated into the structure of township poetry. Mazisi Kunene, most famous for his epic poems about the Zulu "Emperor Shaka The Great"[11], also adopts praises to protest the mass violence perpetrated by the army and the police and to mourn for the suffering of blacks.

> I offer you screams of a thousand mad men
> Who scream to those without mercy
> Who scream over the graveyards
> Of skeletons, piled on piles
> Bones dislocated from their joints.[12]

Praise poetry uses a specialized syntax of parallel constructions and repetition as well as a precise series of symbolic representations. While "The Screams" is not a praise poem as such, it uses similar techniques of syntax and symbolism. For instance, the dislocated bones represent physical torture of the living, and a disjointed social order which tears apart culture and tradition, community and family. The speaker addresses a black audience living closely with the same types of horrors described in the poem. He is also addressing a white audience, offering them the screams they have caused. Alvarez-Pereyre argues that Kunene "is not concerned with a love for the past ... but with the urge to regain his dignity and force the white man to acknowledge the African, the 'Other,' he has so long ignored and humiliated."[13] Through his continued respect for Zulu tradition, Kunene combines the techniques of *praise*

poetry with the concerns of modern political realities.

Besides oral performances, common cultural experiences from "mealie meal" to commuter trains are recorded in township poetry. "The small events of daily life," argues Alvarez-Pereyre, "project a way of 'being-in-the-world'. ... They can be related with a certain detachment and the general approach can be one of acid humour rather than complaint."[14] For example, Lerato Kumalo's "Childhood in Soweto" begins by ironically proving that the "childhood" of her title is not possible in Soweto:

> There are no playgrounds
> no parks
> but plenty dust
> children compete
> cars bicycles hungry mongrels
> narrow streets and garbage
> there is no childhood
> in Soweto[15]

The catalogue of poverty destroys any notion of positive childhood experiences. Instead, the normal playground of Soweto children is dusty streets and garbage heaps. Kumalo's poem is community-oriented; it is social protest. In contrast, Ilva Mackay uses the experience of township riots in a more openly political poetry which adopts the slogan "Mayibuye" as its title.[16] The struggle of the blacks for unity against their oppressors becomes a song of heroism and ascribes a metaphorical mother-child relationship to that between Africa and Africans. The poem balances the past massacres of blacks armed only with stones, against future battles in which blacks will be armed with guns and a promise of success. Both Kumalo and Mackay

protest apartheid, but while one concentrates on the bleak aspects of everyday township life, the other envisages future revolutions born from past outbreaks of violence.

Mongane Wally Serote is less certain than Kunene, Kumalo, or Mackay about the communal sensibilities of urban South Africans. In an interview with Michael Chapman, Serote says:

> I have always wanted to be guided in my writing by the aspirations of my people. However, in none of my poetry collections so far do I fully understand this collective creativity. Had I, the four books would have been written differently.[17]

Serote is a careful observer of human beings. He records the emptiness of many people's lives, the desperate struggle just to survive the high unemployment, lack of food, and the suspicion that one's neighbour is an informer. In "Ode to Somebody," the narrator's description of eyes "broken; and empty; and shut," is counterbalanced by a plea for somebody to "say a prayer."[18] Since Serote is unable to pray to a God who passively stands by while "everything is broken", he cannot find relief from the barrenness of township souls. He searches for somebody who is not empty, who can still believe, and who can still act - even if the action is only to pray. A similar dearth of spiritual hope is found in "A Sleeping Black Boy." Ignored by all who pass him, the boy is not a nursery-rhyme innocent, but drugged asleep after smoking glue.[19] A community which ignores rather than protects its children is a dying community. Serote's desire

to be inspired by his community is frustrated by the lack of hope, the squalor, and the passive acceptance which permeates much of township society.

Despite his pessimism, Serote finds more positive inspiration in the June 16, 1976 uprising of Soweto children and in the increasingly forceful voice of Black Consciousness. In "Time has run out," Serote summarizes the effects of the school children's protest march in Soweto:

> School children took to the streets one day. There will never be another Soweto. There are many kinds of death, and Soweto knows them all; South Africa too, and Southern Africa. You cannot kill children like cattle and then hope that guns are a monopoly.[20]

The anger created by the shooting of the children, and the increasing political awareness among average blacks, gives Serote new strength and hope for political change at the same time as it fills him with anger. The martyring of the children increases the threat to white control. The violence of the whites improves the cultural and psychological hold of Black Consciousness on the imaginations of township peoples.

The passive suffering Serote records in "Amen! Alexandra"[21] is countered by the strength and defiance he records in "What's in this Black 'Shit'" and "Hell, Well Heaven." The black shit Serote writes about is not that of the black man who swallows back his anger and bile to say "baas" to a white official, but that of the man who curses him loudly to his face.[22] The willingness of Serote's character to face a direct confrontation shows a breakdown

of the politically indifferent attitude of blacks as seen in the curser's father. Once protest becomes verbal and directed outwardly rather than inwardly, positive action becomes possible. In "Hell, Well, Heaven" the passivity and suffering of the past are overturned by moving forward with determination:

> I do not know where I have been,
> To have despair so deep and deep and deep
> But Brother,
> I know I'm coming.[23]

The strong walking rhythm of this poem along with its gospel tone and refrain emphasize a sense of hope in opposition to the despair of an unchanging hell. As Alvarez-Pereyre points out, "Serote is the voice of the Black Consciousness movement, minus its didacticism but with the lyrical power of the poet."[24]

Lewis Nkosi in *Home and Exile* isolates the strong musical influence on urban African writing:

> ...South African writing reflected the abrasions and tensions of a colour-bar society; it was fast, jazzy, violent, [and] ill at ease....[25]

Jazz, with its fast-paced energy and violent rhythms, provides the angry emphasis of protest poetry; moreover, the rhythms of the blues underline black suffering. The characters in these poems are often either victims or victimizers; rather than simply expressing individual suffering, they often criticize prevalent attitudes of indifference or passive acceptance in township communities.

The protest against social, rather than merely individual, problems is part of the African oral tradition, especially in *ozibongo* or *praise poetry.* Although Kunene uses praise poetry as a source of traditional narrative forms and motifs,[26] Gwala, Jensma, and Mtshali use Zulu or Xhosa forms as a contrast to looser forms based on contemporary jazz and blues. The dramatic tensions between rural traditions and urban culture, between descriptions of political oppression and the outpourings of irrepressible vitality and humour, and between violent and passive attitudes, produce poetry of conflict and emotional intensity.

Wopko Jensma shares Serote's need to break free from the *status quo*, and like Serote he uses language and a looseness of syntax to produce a sense of spontaneity. Moreover, as Alvarez-Paereyre points out, Jensma is a master of phonetic spelling as he crosses the barriers of language and the restrictions of spelling.[27] While Jensma celebrates life and vitality in some poems, especially through his concentration on jazz rhythms and sounds, he is also possessed by a need to describe the physical violence and destruction of life which dominates township life. In "Joburg Spiritual," the first sequence is written in phonetic English from the point of view of a young man who is beaten by the police.[28] The narrator's speech is punctuated by the rhythm of the lines; the repetition of the "a" sets up a staccato, jerky beat. The cool, relaxed tone of the narrator changes in the second sequence. Instead, he

repeats the "i saw her" structure, indicating his role as observer, who sympathizes but who cannot act.[29] The poverty, mutilation, self-destruction, and humilation Jensma sees is only momentarily relieved by a grin or an act of heroism. Unable to turn away and yet also unable to act, the narrator becomes a vessel through whom the reader learns of black experiences.

Jensma finds escape from inaction in the rhythms and movement of jazz. Numerous poems, like "Pullin Strong at Eleven-Forty-Five," are dedicated to jazz musicians, like Champion Jack Dupree. Jazz infuses "living with the rhythm and freedom which tends to be suppressed in everyday life...."[30] A fight over a woman takes place against a musical backdrop:

> till mornin an eevnin peewee'n malombo jazz
> oh gee boys, who's dat man dere
> blow a flute, boy
> you's my kinda guy -- oh hea'm
> his byebye baby any monday walkin a of blues
>
> as jimmy rushing says: any monday 'n
> she aint your girl, she aint my girl
>
> no, she's anybody's goddamn girl[31]

The humour and vitality of this poem is carried by its dialect and by its jazzy beat, rather than just by its subject. The daily speech and concerns of township blacks is augmented by the musical elements.

Mafika Gwala also focuses on the value of jazz music to black ghetto life. However, unlike Jensma or Serote, Gwala "tries to straddle the traditional and the new, the rural and the urban, the praise song and the jive, human and Black

consciousness."[32] For instance, Gwala illustrates the black view of contraceptives as anti-life and as an attempt by whites to suppress the black population:

> She laughs
> She bitterlaughs -- scoffs at the Pill and Abortion.
> Points out white immigration and the "Botha Baby".
> Add: "Contracepted sex would spoil my womanhood.
> Beside, to fall pregnant is to continue with LIFE".
>
> She dances
> She dances to a live tune.
> Jazz never was stamped "Made in USA"[33]

For Gwala jazz is African life; the language of jazz, even more than township slang, epitomizes the black identity. However, although Gwala is always defiant, his vision is not always attractive. In "Gumba, Gumba, Gumba," Gwala delineates the daily struggle for survival in Soweto.[34] The daily obscenities, indignities, and death are heard through language, understood through language, but retaliation is not just in the words or music but in the violence and revolutionary struggle as well. For blacks, the word "struggle" is in itself a euphemism for revolution. Even the world of Jensma's sparkling hot jazz is not immune to the grim actualities.

In 1971 Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali sold 16,000 copies in South Africa of his first volume of poetry, entitled *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum.*[35] Mtshali's success stems in part from his emphasis on his Zulu roots and in part from his distinctly Sowetan mixture of English with Zulu and Afrikaans.[36] Mtshali, like Kunene, speaks to the

detribalized of the fragmented roots of their indigenous culture. However, like Jensma and Gwala, he also addresses the urban African in the major images and dialects of his daily life. Above all Mtshali's poetry combines irony and compassion for the blacks victimized by apartheid. Similarly to Serote's glue-drugged boy, Mtshali's "Boy on a Swing" emphasizes the helplessness and naivety of the children. The boy asks his mother, "Where did I come from? / When will I wear long trousers?" -- questions a boy of any colour might ask. However, these innocent questions are followed by a final, adult question "Why was my father jailed?"[37] The last question is the starting point for anger and political awareness. Suddenly a boy at play becomes a potential soldier of the ANC.

Other victims, however, are treated with less pathos and more bitterness when Mtshali paints them as co-conspirators in their own oppression. In "The Washerwoman's Prayer," the sympathetic description of her "raw, knobbly and calloused" hands leads into a dramatic prayer to God asking "Why am I so tormented?" The sympathy for the washerwoman's misery is undermined, however, by her grateful acceptence of the Lord's response:

> "My child! Dear child!", she heard,
> "Suffer for those who live in gilded sin,
> Toil for those who swim in a bowl of pink gin."[38]

She not only misses the sarcasm in the line but she does not question the justice or the morality of a God which endorses white supremacy. Moreover, she willingly suffers not for

her own sins but for the sins of her white employers. Her passivity is in part responsible for her suffering. Njabulo S. Ndebele argues that Mtshali's poetry emphasizes the utter hopelessness of an unquestioning and an unchanging society.[39] Unlike Serote or Gwala, Mtshali does not celebrate the positive, life-giving aspects of township culture, "their moments of joy and creative togetherness, and their search for themselves -- all of which would lead to a celebration of their struggle for survival."[40] The passive, apolitical attitudes of the *lumpenproletariat* are at the root of Mtshali's anger; his protests are directed not at the injustices of the whites but at the compliance of the blacks.

In "The Detribalised",[41] Mtshali describes the cultural emptiness of a township couple who have little in the way of education but who wear American and European fashion, who use "Artra, Hi-Lite / skin lightening cream," and who unkink their hair. They have no bonds to tribal culture but they have also no urban culture which is not borrowed from white society. Although the unnamed man has gone to jail in Johannesburg, he is not political and reads the special black editions of white-controlled newspapers. In short, this detribalized couple not only totally lack Black Consciousness but they also aspire to pass for white. While the unnamed man never calls a white man "baas", he is implicitly compliant towards the *status quo.* His victimization is not religious like the washerwoman's, but

cultural and ideological. The detribalized are not heroic victims; they are neither admirable nor sympathetic. Mtshali himself says that "In my writing, I'm not trying to elicit sympathy, I'm not indulging in self-pity, I'm not apologizing for anything."[42]

On the other hand, not all of Mtshali's poetry is directed in anger against black complacency. Some of his poems, like the one which eulogizes Mtshali's brother Ben, are also a promise of change and revenge. This poem is

> ... germinated in the seedbed of seething fury,
> the fury of an endless search --
> relentless for the truth --
> though no truth will ever alleviate the sorrow
> at the loss of my bother, Ben.
> It is to him that I dedicate my entire life.
> It is to him that I devote my whole being,
> to ferret out every fact
> that will lead me to the skulking perpetrators
> of the dastard deed,
> that rendered my two beloved nieces,
> Thembi and Zanele, fatherless.[43]

The sheer determination and sincere grief and fury which fill the poem do not dwell on victimization but on victory, not on acceptance but on revenge. At the same time Mtshali acknowledges that uncovering the truth will not alleviate the present suffering, but it will satisfy a need to strike back. Hope lies in strength and in anger, not in forgiveness or meekness.

Although Sipho Sepamla has lived all his life in Soweto, and although he has edited *New Classic* and *S'ketsh*,[44] he has never been exiled or imprisoned for long periods. Instead, he seems to write protest poetry which

the state will tolerate.[45] Sepamla's poetry tends to be directed more towards the reforming views of white liberals than towards raising the consciousness of black workers. For example, in "Measure for Measure", Sepamla addresses himself to white officials and in an ironic tone seems to comply with white policy:

> count me enough wages to make certain that i
> grovel in the mud for more food
>
> teach me just so much of the world that i
> can fit into certain types of labour
>
> ... and when all that is done
> let me tell you this
> you'll never know how far i stand from you[46]

The dignity of Sepamla's speaker is founded in a strong sense of self-worth despite the poor economic and social position his low wages and lack of education dictate. The inability of the white official to understand the black speaker is a weapon of resistance. In "Children of the Earth" the poet varies his choice of stanza patterns and language to contrast the official social policies of the Nationalist government with the real poverty and social problems they create.[47] Sepamla isolates social illnesses and combats the white-washed rhetoric of the state with direct language which translates the double-speak into what "that is" in actuality.

Sepamla's main talent lies in his ability to exploit language for humorous effects. He combines a style of broken English with "township Xhosa" and "tsotsi-taal"[48] to induce a linguistic interplay which underlines his point.

For instance, in "The Bookshop" the speaker's good-natured banter is strengthened by his broken grammar and his assertions of literacy and ironically undercut by the speaker's apologetic tone:

> Here I is
> Too literate to reads comics and the Bible
> I walks into a bookshop a newspapers in one armpit
> ...
> The likes of me can be excused for being literate
> Besides a good sight is a literate me[49]

The pun on "a literate" reveal the speaker's ability to create sophisticated linguistic play while at the same time pleading ignorance. Moreover, the speaker's love of English-language magazines while at the same time rejecting childish comics and white religion indicates a selectivity of cultural stimuli. The beginning of cultural awareness comes with the beginning of literary judgement.

Other poems, like "To Whom It May Concern", parody the language of official documents such as passes. The bearer of the pass is allowed to travel "Subject to these particulars / He lives / Subject to the provisions / Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925 / Amended often".[50] Sepamla's love for Soweto and his pride in the vitality of township culture enables him to mock Passes, to criticize apartheid sharply and to use sophisticated language. Even more than Gwala and Jensma, Sepamla is conscious of the musicality of words. In such poems as "The Blues is You in Me" and "The Soweto Blues,"[51] blues beats are used to slow down lines and to reveal the dreary depression or to create a fast tempo in line with the upbeat anger of the poet. Sepamla's "use of

irony [is] more powerful and more varied than Mtshali's ... He does not have Serote's forcefulness...."[52] Certainly, Sepamla's sense of humour celebrates the cultural variety and endurance of Soweto as much as it criticizes social problems.

The explosion of poetry in Soweto and Alexandra in the seventies, both in defiance of oppression and in celebration of life, has its roots in jazz and the blues, as well as in traditional oral poetry. Moreover it touches on all aspects of township daily life as well as on various crises in the struggle to end apartheid. Township poetry is both angry and encouraging; it is both hopeful and desperate for change. Although it is dominated by the ideology of Black Consciousness, and although it records black experience, it is not exclusively written by blacks, nor are its messages confined to Soweto. It exposes stereotyped behaviour and tries to speak for the victims of oppression everywhere in South Africa while at the same time speaking to them. Above all, township poetry is a balancing of tensions to produce a vital culture which is one of the few things most urban South Africans have left to lose and which is perhaps the one thing that keeps poets like Sipho Sepamla going:

> I will have to ask for my slum location again
> I feel a lot went wrong when I was moved from it
> a lot died in the process
> I lost my stance for standing up straight
> I lost the rhythm of walking right
> I lost my sense of humour
> I lost the feel for loving
> I lost my sense of smell
> ...I know I don't just want fresh air

I need the smell of sweaty life
oh yes I want to live colourfully once more[53]

Chapter Five

The Censor and Culture: Talking to the Peach Tree

words have lost meaning
like all notations they've been misused

most people will admit
a whining woman can overstate her case

... Let's talk to the peach tree
find out how it feels to be in the ground[1]

A word often associated with South African poetry is "commitment": commitment to political protest, to human communication regardless of colour barriers and censorship, and to African culture regardless of Western influences. However, the diversity of languages, ideologies, and cultural backgrounds has led to a struggle, not just against the "gagging" of poets by the censors, but to define what constitutes South African culture. Afrikaners, English-speaking South Africans (ESSA), and Africans are all looking for artists who will articulate their group's place in South African culture and who will elevate their group's achievements and aspirations over all other contributors to the cultural matrix. Geoffrey Haresnape points out that "many reformers and activists need versifiers to bring emotional and incantatory powers into the service of their political programmes."[2] As Sepamla's "Talk to the Peach Tree" suggests, commitment to propaganda often interferes with the commitment to meaningful communication as the poets overstate their case. In turn, the censors encourage some voices and inhibit others, not necessarily according to the

degree of commitment but according to how the Nationalist government perceives the "subversiveness" of any individual poem or poet. Breyten Breytenbach was published from prison, albeit slightly censored, because many Afrikaners regard him as the *volksdigter* of the Afrikaans language, while Dennis Brutus was banned even after release from prison on the grounds that he is a Communist.[3] How successfully any poetry influences the shaping of South African society can be in part evaluated in light of how strongly the censors seek to control or suppress it.

The Afrikaner hegemony over government policies "was built on a foundation of language and culture, church and politics."[4] The Nationalist state has incorporated most of the media, including radio, television, and the Afrikaans-language newspapers into its power structure.[5] Moreover, the government has set up a comprehensive network of censorship laws to protect Afrikaans culture from foreign, ESSA, and black influences even when they do not express overtly political themes. Sexual explicitness, as John Dugard explains, is seen as being particularly threatening and is associated, however distortedly, with Communism.[6] The Publications Appeal Board annually publishes a digest of banned books. Many books are censored on the grounds that they are pornographic. Christopher Hope regards the digest as proof that the censors' chief aim is not to prohibit politically subversive material but to regulate all aspects of publication which might threaten

Afrikaner cultural values.[7]

White liberals have long protested literary censorship as a dangerous practice inhibiting artistic freedom and the exchange of intellectual ideas. However, numerous liberals respond with self-censorship, and a tendency to write uncontroversial verse. Stephen Watson views the liberal poetry of Guy Butler and Christopher Hope as disastrously bland, consisting "of so much unleavened, if not half-baked dough."[8] While Watson is perhaps extreme in his aesthetic condemnation of liberal poetry, he is not nearly as harsh as Steve Biko, who accused white liberals of attempting to speak for blacks rather than permitting blacks their own voice. Biko resented the white intellectual's arrogance which assumes the role of negotiator between black and Afrikaans cultures and thus inadvertently contributes to the silencing of black voices.[9] Moreover, despite liberals' avowals of intellectual openness, they often engage in racist discourse. Sepamla's "Civilization Aha," reveals the ideological collusion between the explicitly racist policies of the government and Christianity:

> i thought of a whiteman
> the first time i saw god's portrait
> i thought of a blackman
> the first time I met satan on earth
> i must be honest
> it wasn't only bantu education
> it was all part of what they say is western civilization.[10]

Even Christianity, the most well-intentioned aspect of white culture, is viewed as detrimental to Black Consciousness and culture. By attaching a positive meaning to "white" and a

negative one to "black," white supremacist doctrine becomes fixed into religious discourse. The dangers of hidden or inadvertent censorship of ideas is difficult to assess, when long-term goals of persuading the government to alter apartheid have the immediate result of aiding the efforts of official censors to silence dissent.

The ability of writers to disseminate ideas is hampered by the double barriers of language and illiteracy. Although there are almost twice as many Afrikaans speakers as there are white English speakers, most South African literature is written in English.[11] Afrikaans, Zulu, and Xhosa speakers, while often versed in English, are nonetheless at a cultural disadvantage. Both Alvarez-Pereyre and Ezekial Mphahlele argue that the advantages of writing English outweigh the disadvantages. For example, the use of English allows African poets to experiment with new forms and provides a written tradition which encourages poets to confront adversity.[12] Moreover, the poet's audience is greatly increased if he writes in English than if he writes in Zulu or Tswana.[13] However, Lewis Nkosi argues that African culture cannot be reclaimed from colonial ideologies if writers wage the battle in a European language.[14] Ironically, Western mythologies and imagery have replaced traditional African cultural emblems even in poetry which protests white supremacy:

> (Apollo was martyred by the masters
> and the keepers of the keys of the kingdom
> made us eat husks and baboon flesh
> while they drank the nectar)[15]

Nortje's protest against the economic depression of black Africans associates African images of husks and baboons with poverty and ignorance, and Western images of nectar with white economic and educational superiority. Nortje's choice of classical mythology undercuts the value he places on black poets when he identifies the poet with Apollo, a figure alien to the African context.

Further difficulties in communication result from the low literacy rate (51%) among blacks as compared to the over 70% literacy of whites, Asians, and Coloureds.[16] A large percentage of the black population is cut off from ideas which are presented in written form. Although African poetry is traditionally performed orally, and although both rural and urban black poets continue to recite poetry to large audiences, the transmission of white and coloured poetry to illiterate blacks, is curtailed. Even if an exiled poet succeeds in getting his poetry published in South Africa under a pseudonym,[17] he cannot be assured even then that his poems will reach the illiterate or semi-literate.

Beyond the limitations of language and literacy, the poet is also subjected to a multitude of censorship laws designed to eliminate the ideological enemies of the Nationalist government, namely Soviet Communism, Western liberalism, black theology and nationalism, and Black Consciousness itself.[18] The 1974 Publications Act is the main mechanism of literary censorship and, while it has

reduced the severity of obscenity and blasphemy censorship, it has also increased political censorship, especially that of black protest. Under this act, magazines, journals, reviews, and anthologies produced by black artists and editors are banned.[19] In addition, the Advocate General Act makes it an offence to comment on official corruption and misconduct. Poets themselves are most often banned under the Suppression of Communism Act (1966). The act is extensively used to ban and/or to expel actual Communists as well as non-Communists, and anti-Communists.[20] The Government defines a terrorist almost as loosely as it defines a Communist. Under the Terrorism Act a terrorist is anyone who has "the effect of encouraging forcible resistance to the government," or whose actions are viewed as "causing feelings of hostility between whites and blacks."[21]

Nadine Gordimer places in perspective the results of the comprehensive network of legislation:

> In South Africa there are 97 definitions of what is officially "undesirable" in literature: subversive, obscene, or othervise "offensive". They are not always invoked, but are there when needed to suppress a particular book or silence an individual writer.[22]

In contrast to the numerous official definitions of what is subversive, Oswald Mtshali's assertion that "Writing poetry is not a subversive pastime"[23] seems a naive, or at least an unrealistic defence. The content of a poem is not easily separated from the poet's politics since anyone banned under

the Internal Security Act, whether living in South Africa or abroad, cannot be quoted or published without official permission.[24] Any writing by a person under a political ban, no matter what the subject or form, is automatically banned. Thus, Dennis Brutus, who was banned for his activities as a critic of apartheid in sports rather than for his activities as a poet, cannot be published in South Africa and, as far as South African literature is concerned, "Brutus could be described as a black hole."[25] No matter how innocuous the poem, the poet's status as a subversive makes his writing subversive.

Censorship legislation is not the end of Government interference in a writer's life. André Brink asserts that there is a special section of Security Police whose operations are

> directed towards the surveillance and intimidation of writers (always bearing in mind that our lives were still easy compared to those of Black writers who could, and still can, be openly persecuted with the crudest and most brutal of means -- insult, assault, detention, 'banishment,' deprival of income, of social contact, or of the means to publish...).[26]

If attacking the poet is insufficient to stop him from publishing, the publisher is also open to attack. On March 13 and 19, 1987 the publishing offices of Ravan Press were vandalized. On the first occasion two men stole money and defaced property and on the second occasion three men petrol-bombed the offices.[27] No one can claim that such extreme response to black writers and their publishers is

rational or justifiable on the grounds that the *literature* is violent.

One result of official censorship and of the violence is the strong psychological pressure NOT to write, especially among those writers who not only stay in South Africa, but who have either had a book banned or are under a personal ban. "Having a book banned," says Sepamla, whose novel *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, and whose volume of poetry *The Soweto I Love*, have both been banned, "discourages, demoralises and depresses you."[28] The emotional cost to the writer is high, but so is the cost to the quality of writing. Prison, exile, bans, and police surveillence isolate many writers not only from their potential audience but from their fellow writers. Sepamla argues that isolation is detrimental to writers not only because it prevents the exchange of ideas, but also because it prevents the exchange of technical know-how.[29] Young writers cannot learn from the successes and failures of older writers; they are cut off from the benefits of an unpruned tradition. Lacking a literary past, many poets write in a vacuum, without a sense of direction and without a well-developed aesthetic judgement.

A third effect of censorship is the gagging of many writers; not only do they stop writing protest poetry, but they simply stop writing. Don Mattera, a poet banned for his political activism, was placed under a five-year ban November 20, 1973 which was renewed for five years in 1978

and finally lifted in May, 1982. Although the ban has been removed, Mattera is unable to overcome the silence produced by long-term isolation:

> I was one of the most gregarious beings I know. I was a people's man. And now having been cut off from the people, ... and taken away from the very important, very vital life of peopleness and moving around, of touching and being touched, and suddenly thrown into a world of isolation and rejection. ... I moved into this lonely world, the world of the forgotten, the world of the twilight people ... and you die. I died. It was a heavy dying and I stopped writing. And I refused to write. I couldn't see the purpose of writing again.[30]

Mattera movingly describes two extremes: the gregarious man and the silenced man, the social being and the forgotten being. Mattera lost direction and purpose, and, although the ban is now lifted, he remains directionless. Moreover, the gagging of individual writers and writing has a cumulative effect over time. It is not just writers but all South Africans who are silenced. Lewis Nkosi argues that "Under the circumstances it is difficult to see how South Africans can recover their lost potential for speech."[31] "Under the censor's guillotine," by Pitika Ntuli, describes poignantly the stifling of poetry.[32] The brutal treatment of the poet dissolves his voice into the elements and his words are dissolved into meaningless sounds. However, Ntuli does not despair, realising that the wind carries sound, the beginning of speech. Despite the oppressor's violence, poetry cannot be completely guillotined as long as the potential for speech remains.

How to oppose censorship is an open debate amongst most South African writers. Two strategies have emerged: the first, advocated by Nadine Gordimer, is to boycott the whole censorship apparatus; the second is to work within the system and appeal any banning of one's own books. Gordimer's famous statement that "We shall not be rid of censorship until we are rid of apartheid"[33] has been taken up by Sipho Sepamla and Breyten Breytenbach.[34] This comprehensive disdain for all censorship and the whole apartheid system is echoed by André Brink, who writes that "Unless every single author in the country ... can be assured of a 'square deal' there can be no peace of mind for anyone alse [sic]."[35] However, despite the ideological purity of these writers, "total boycott" translates as exile or as not writing at all.

The struggle against individual banning orders is fought on numerous fronts. Even the choice of poetry over prose is in part a tactic employed by black writers to avoid censorship.[36] While a volume of poetry by one poet is easy to ban, anthologies, poetry journals, mimeographs, and oral recitations by numerous authors make censorship a more complex, less successful venture. For instance, although individual issues of *Staffrider* are banned and sometimes unbanned, Kirkwood has not withdrawn the journal from publication. Instead, his strategy is to distribute as many copies of any given issue as possible BEFORE banning becomes official, thus assuring that some censored material reaches

the public.[37]

Dennis Brutus employed yet another strategy after his release from Robben Island and before his exile. Although he was prohibited from writing poetry, he was allowed to write letters. Working within the proscribed limits, Brutus found a creative outlet by writing a series of poem-letters, mostly to his sister-in-law, Martha, which have since been published as *Letters to Martha* (1968). Another attempt to circumvent censorship and still reach a wide audience was Medupe, formed in 1976. Medupe organized poets to recite their revolutionary poems in the schools and public halls of Soweto.[38] Although Medupe was banned in 1977, recitations by groups of poets continue to appeal to township dwellers. At other times publishers and poets go through official channels to appeal the banning of individual books and/or individuals. Sometimes successful, publishers are aware that unbannings, even more than bannings, tend to occur randomly.

Mongane Wally Serote, living in Gaborone, Botswana, has written two sixty-page poems: *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) and *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978). The refrain of these two long poems is a single line: "i can say." Serote emphasizes not only his ability to speak out, but through his insistent repetition of the line reaffirms his commitment to speech, and his compulsion to speak, despite all efforts to silence him. This is the most difficult and frustrating strategy against censorship: the dogged refusal to be silent, the

persistent, continuous outpouring of poetry despite bans, threats, violence, or exile:

> i can say
> hurrah
> i can hear voices and voices and voices
> saying child
> honey-child
> i love you
> i can hear voices and voices and voices replying
> hurrah
> i can say
> i
> ... i can say
> one day the laughter will break[39]

Serote can say that there will be future laughter; he can say that the voices of South Africans will grow louder and more triumphant, and that communication between people will become loving. He also can and does assert his identity and his right to speak his vision of the truth.

Furthermore, in *Behold Man, Flowers*, Serote asserts that despite attempts to silence him or to make him rescind his previous writing, and despite any of his own inadequacies as a writer, no one and nothing can make his words go away:

> and i will never ever be able to say it the way i
> should say it
> ...
> a man can point at you and take his finger back
> but his word he can never take back
> ...
> i can say
> if you don't know about storms they will take you
> they will wipe you away
> i can say there is nothing that we know in the end
> i can say, ah
> behold the flowers
> ...
> i will say again
> behold the flowers, they begin to bloom![40]

Serote's determination never to be silenced and never to

give in to violence is as impressive as it is repetitive. Nonetheless, the poet's stubborn refusal to halt the outpouring of words is only one element of the whole battle. Words alone cannot bring down the Nationalist Government and with it the whole bureaucracy of censorship. As Lewis Nkosi exasperatedly quips, "You would think that the South African Government should have been written to death by now."[41] The writer needs more than words and determination; he needs the patience to outlast the pro-apartheid propagandists.

Whatever Western forms, aesthetic attitudes, and languages find their way into the poems and whatever African traditions influence contemporary poets, the main thrust of the South African poetry written since Sharpeville (1960) has been protest, commitment, and explanation. Nkosi argues that these three qualities have become expected of good writers.[42] Both Dennis Brutus and Sipho Sepamla agree that the provision of a true record of South African politics cannot be separated from poetry; in fact, it is the purpose of poetry in South Africa.[43] Moreover, the need for a positive perception of black culture to counteract Afrikaner cultural hegemony has always been the main focus of the Black Consciousness movement, especially in the Townships. Those critics, mostly white, who reject the openly political, often revolutionary aspects of the poetry usually do so on aesthetic grounds. What they fail to consider is that revolutionary poetry must necessarily chose to create a

revolutionary aesthetics:

> The black poets who have sprung from seemingly nowhere are the oases in the bleak desert of black man's life from where he will drink the waters of liberation as he forges his way to the green pastures of complete freedom.[44]

Beyond recording the truth, beyond protests and explanations of apartheid or of black experience, contemporary South African poetry is committed to hope for change and for a better life. Despite prison, exile, poverty, and despair, the poet continues to voice alternatives:

> So give me a pen
> I will write only a snippet of taut verbal muscle,
> a sinew of controlled emotion;
> I hope to strike a responsive chord
> in the jaded soul of the forlorn
> whose diminished ego lies in a pile of rubble.[45]

Mtshali, like Serote, Sepamla, and the rest, attempts to instil optimism, not through shrill slogans promising the annihilation of the whites, but through beautiful, succinct, and inspirational verse. The poetry, however, is only part of a whole cultural network of films, paintings, photographs, theatre, dance and music.[46] The various cultural aspects seek to give lasting and sustaining hope to the African people. More than this, South African culture, in whatever form, reaches out to the rest of Africa and the world with a message that commitment is a necessary condition of good art.

Steve Biko viewed South African culture as "A culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity."[47] However, the culture also exists under the

pressures of diversity and segregation along the colour bar. Language, ideology, and the gap between white and black cultural groups reveal how the struggle for cultural hegemony merges with the struggle for political control. Although all writers are unified in their disdain for censorship, the views of poetry's proper subject and purpose, of aesthetics and of what constitutes culture are vastly different. While poems about prison, exile, and township life are a large component of South African poetry as a whole, poetry by women, oral poetry, and poetry of the tribal homelands are also worthy of extended study. Despite opposition, censorship, and a racist government, South African poets continue to be committed to giving a voice to a people divided by conflict:

> We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible -- a more human face.[48]
>
> - Steve Biko

NOTES

Chapter One

[1]The definition of South African literature is itself difficult. Guy Butler and Chris Mann, ***A New Book of South African Verse in English*** (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979) include Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling, who have written poems about South Africa but who cannot be considered South African poets. On the other hand, poets like Dennis Brutus and Es'kia Mphahlele have lived outside of South Africa for more than twenty years. Moreover their poetry and critical writings are banned in South Africa and yet they are still considered, by some at least, to be South African poets. To further complicate the issue, colonial and modern literature in both English and Afrikaans ignore, sometimes even seek to deny, the existence of black South African oral poetries and poetics. The complex literary past of this country does not allow an easy isolation of those characteristics which identify South African literature.

[2]Sipho Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas," ***Soweto Poetry***, ed. Michael Chapman (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill Book Company 1982) 115.

[3]Douglas Livingstone, "The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and Others in English: Notes towards a Critical Evaluation," ***Soweto Poetry***, 157.

[4]Lionel Abraham, "Black Experience into English Verse: A Survey of Local African Poetry, 1960-70," ***Soweto Poetry***, 137.

[5]For a summary of the typical criticisms, see Anne McClintock, "'Azikwelaw' (We Will Not Ride): Politics and Value in Black South African Poetry," ***Critical Inquiry*** 13.3 (1987): 619, and Mbulelo Mzamane, "from 'Literature and Politics among Blacks in South Africa," ***Soweto Poetry,*** 150. See also Cosmo Pieterse, Introduction, ***Seven South African Poets,*** xi-xii, and Barry Feinberg, Introduction, ***Poets to the People***, 17-18 for defensive reactions to negative criticisms.

[6]David Maughan Brown, "Black Criticism and Black Aesthetics," ***Soweto Poetry***, 50. He also asserts that the reader must be aware of the traditions, customs, and mythology of the writer and that there exists a black aesthetic drawn from the black environment, way of life, and beliefs.

[7]Post-structuralism has long asserted the political function of literature as an institution. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,"

Lenin and Philosophy, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, for explorations of the hegemonic aspects of literature. The assertion of literature's political function is also evident in Camus and Sartre, both of whom are very influential in African critical thought. Also see Nelson Mandela, "The Shifting Sands of Illusion," *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, Fore. Ruth First (1965: London: Heinemann, 1986) 35 for a concise criticism of the ideology of the Liberal Party.

[8]Stephen Watson, "Recent White South African Poetry & the Language of Liberalism," *Standpunte* 36.2 (1983): 14-15.

[9]As quoted in McClintock, 620. See Appendix A for a glossary of South African terminology.

[10]Watson, 16-17.

[11]Watson, 16. "Their [white, English-speaking] poetry cannot avoid reproducing the prosaicness, the tawdriness -- some would say the banality -- of a people whose aesthetic first commandment would probably be it must be Rational, it must be Reasonable."

[12]Watson, 16.

[13]Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa*, trans. Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1984) 15.

[14]Christopher Hope, "In the Middle of Nowhere" *The Country of the Black Pig* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1981) 6. See Appendix C for complete poem.

[15]For a definition of "Coloured" and for the new politcal positivism of the term "black" see Appendix A.

[16]See Cosmo Pieterse's interview with Dennis Brutus (n.t.), *African Writers Talking*, eds. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972) 56 and Lewis Nkosi's interview with Mazisi Kunene (n.t.), *African Writers Talking*, 85.

[17]Pieterse, 85.

[18]Brutus, in particular, has been criticized for a lack of militant poetry; see Alvarez-Pereyre, 138. See also R.N. Egudu, "Pictures of Pain: The Poetry of Dennis Brutus," *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976) 131-144.

[19]Alex la Guma interview with Mazisi Kunene (n.t.) *African Writers Talking*, 89. "...in Africa the emphasis is always on the symbol, the symbol which in essence is the representation of the attitude of the community, and in

fact, it is the easiest access to a communal expression, for it contains communal meaning."

[20]Dr. Ullyatt's argument is summarized in Brown, 52. Dr. Ullyatt also criticizes the black poets for their political themes and the lack of a lightness of tone in their poems.

[21]Hedy Davis' argument is also summarized in Brown, 47. Brown also summarizes critical responses made by Jos Slabbert and Kelwyn Sole in the same issue of *Contrast* as Davis makes her criticisms.

[22]Christopher Heywood, "Introduction: The Quest for Identity," *Aspects of South African Literature*, xiv. See also the criticism of Hedy Davis as cited above.

[23]See Cosmo Pieterse's interview of Dennis Brutus (n.t.) *African Writers Talking*, 59-60. See also T.T. Moyana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," *Aspects of South African Literature,* 86.

[24]Alvarez-Pereyre, 39.

[25]Alvarez-Pereyre, 39.

[26]Mazisi Kunene, "South African Oral Traditions" *Aspects of South African Literature,* 33.

[27]Alvarez-Pereyre, 39.

[28]Mokoena Xihoshi, "Poetry Towards the Revolution," *Sechaba* (Apr. 1981): 16. See Appendix A for note on *Sechaba*.

[29]Alvarez-Pereyre, 4-5, and 261.

[30]Sepamla, 117.

[31]Alvarez-Pereyre, 4-5.

[32]Pieterse, 58.

[33]Cosmo Pieterse, "Song *(We Sing)*," *Poets to the People*, ed. Barry Feinberg (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974) 65.

[34]Cosmo Pieterse, "Guerilla," *Poets to the People*, 66.

[35]Wopko Jensma, "Joburg Spiritual" "Poetry Under Apartheid," ed. Peter Rodda *Transatlantic Review* 53/54 (1976/77): 101-103. See Appendix C.

[36]Jensma, 101-103.

[37]See Appendix A.

[38]As quoted in Alvarez-Pereyre, 161.

[39]Sipho Sepamla, "The Soweto Blues," *Children of the Earth* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker (Pty) Ltd., 1983) 52.

[40]Xihoshi, (May 1981): 15.

[41]Oswald Mtshali, "Black Poetry in South Africa: What It Means," *Aspects of South African Literature,* 127.

[42]Xihoshi, (May, 1981): 15-16. He goes on to say that "the poem allows us to be expert by proxy, to enter through the channel of language and its attributes, areas for exploration and strata of experience that would otherwise have been relatively remote, fairly abstract."

[43]Sipho Sepamla, "Mkize," *Children of the Earth,* 17.

[44]A.S. van Niekerk, *Dominee, are you listening to the drums?* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers (Pty) Ltd., 1982) 44-53.

[45]Mongane Wally Serote, "What's in This Black 'Shit'," *Poets to the People*, 69-70. See Appendix C.

[46]Censorship and its effects on South African poetry will be discussed in Chapter Five.

[47]McClintock, 598.

[48]Breyten Breytenbach as quoted in Alvarez-Pereyre, 26.

[49]Moyana, 92. See also the entry for "kitchen-kaffir," *A Dictionary of Africanisms. Contributions of the Sub-Saharan Africa to the English Language*, ed. Gerard M. Dalgish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982) 88.

[50]McClintock, 597-598.

[51]The Bantu Education Acts (1953-1959) enforce segregated education from primary school to the universities. They also prevent Africans from gaining access to European ideas which subvert apartheid, pro-tribalism, policies. Resentment among Africans is very well summarized in 1957 by Nelson Mandela in the ANC journal *Liberation*: "The friendship and interracial harmony that is forged through the admixture and association of various racial groups at the mixed universities constitute a direct threat to the policy of apartheid and baasskap and the [Bantu Education] Bill has been enacted to remove this threat." (Nelson Mandela, "The Doors are Barred," *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, 50).

[52]Kunene, "South African Oral Tradition," 24.

[53]Kunene, 24. See also Brown, "Black Criticism and Black Aesthetics," for specific studies on the functions of African oral culture.

[54]Alvarez-Pereyre, 117.

[55]Mtshali, 124. He goes on to say that "Through my poetry I am trying to gather the scattered pieces of my culture, and this is not only my goal, but it is also that of the crop of other poets who have sprung up like mushrooms in the stormy life of the blackman. It is dictated by the political ideology...known to the outside world under the insidious name of apartheid", 125.

[56]Tony Emmett, "Oral, Political and Communal Aspects of Township Poetry in the Mid-seventies," *Soweto Poetry,* 177. Emmett quotes Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 19: "The praise poems of the Bantu people of South Africa are one of the most specialised and complex forms of poetry to be found in Africa".

[57]Alex la Guma interview with Kunene, 89.

[58]McClintock, 618.

Chapter Two

[1]D.M. Zwelonke, *Robben Island*, (London: Heinemann, 1973) 40-41.

[2]The Rivonia Trial Group consisted of nine men, including Nelson Mandela, who defended them. The others are Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg, Lionel Bernstein, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni. All except for Bernstein, who was acquitted, were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. See the transcript of the defence during the 1964 trial in Nelson Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, 162-189.

[3]For instance Breyten Breytenbach served his seven years in the Pretoria Central Prison ("Beverley Hills") and in Pollsmoor Prison, Cape Town. Mandela was transferred to Pollsmoor around 1980 in an attempt to dismantle "Mandela University."

[4]Zwelonke, 15.

[5]Some of the methods of torture and interrogation are graphically described in Breyten Breytenbach, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984) 349-352. The methods include "the submarine" (holding

the prisoner's head underwater until he drowns or faints), "the aeroplane ride" (prisoner hung by the elbows or knees), or "telephoning" or "playing the radio" (touching various parts of the prisoner's body with electrodes). Many of Brutus' poems and much of Zwelonke's novel describe these and other forms of torture.

[6]Breytenbach, 304-305. Zwelonke, isolates cell "C1" as the "University of Makana" around which the cultural and educational lives of the prisoners are centred.

[7]Zwelonke, 15, 69, 96, and Breytenbach, 281-282. See Appendix A.

[8]Breyten Breytenbach, "'I am not an Afrikaner anymore'," *Index on Censorship*, 3 (1983): 5: "Most of the criminals are direct victims of the damage that Apartheid has done by ripping families asunder. The political prisoners have it relatively better; they are an elite."

[9]Zwelonke, Breytenbach, and Dennis Brutus describe homosexuality as one of the most perverse parts of prison life since the "women" are usually unwilling and often raped. The warders often force sexual relations between prisoners for their amusement. The writers report that homosexual acts often coincide with coprophilia, necrophilia, self-mutilation, drug abuse, and madness. Zwelonke describes a young man who becomes a *tsotsi* as a result of forced sodomy. Breytenbach's description of the criminal subculture in Pollsmoor Prison includes stabbings, mutilations, gang rape, and ritual murder and cannibalism, (272-272). Finally, since South African jails are overcrowded and since people are often arrested and held without trial, the officials are only interested in accounting for the correct number of bodies, dead or alive. The individual prisoner is of no interest, and therefore he is vulnerable to practically any form of outrage upon his person from fellow prisoners and the warders alike.

[10]Breytenbach, 282.

[11]Besides the separation of white and black prisoners and besides the relatively considerate treatment white prisoners receive (including more and better food), the racial tensions are strong between the prisoners (called *Kaffirs, Hotnots,* or *Bandiets*) and the prison warders (*boeres*). Guards insist on being called *baas* by coloureds and blacks. Political prisoners are sometimes called *meister*, but otherwise they are scorned.

[12]For example, Breytenbach's poem, "Letter from abroad to Butcher," describes the death of Steve Biko and has, according to Breytenbach, had some influence in creating legal provisions for supervising the health of prisoners. See Breytenbach, "'I am not an Afrikaner anymore," 5.

[13]Zwelonke, 146.

[14]Zwelonke, 150-151.

[15]Zwelonke, 151.

[16]Zwelonke, 149.

[17]Anthony Delius is of mixed Afrikaner and English descent. He lives in self-imposed exile in London, England, where he has been an important contact for recently exiled South Africans. His poetry *is not* banned by the South African government.

[18]Anthony Delius, "The Island," "Poetry Under Apartheid," 94.

[19]Dennis Brutus, "Robben Island Sequence," *Stubborn Hope* (London: Heinemann, 1978) 58-59. See Appendix C.

[20]Brutus admits that after two months in solitary confinement on Robben Island, he tried to commit suicide. See William E. Thompson, "Dennis Brutus: An interview," *Ufahamu* 12/13 (1982/1983): 73.

[21]T.T. Moyana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," *Aspects of South African Literature*, 94.

[22]Thompson, 73.

[23]Thompson, 74.

[24]Thus, Brutus's poems about exile are written in the same direct style he evolved in his prison poems. See section on Brutus's exile poems in Chapter Three.

[25]House arrest means Brutus could not leave his house between 6 pm and 6 am, could not participate in social gatherings for any purpose; he was also banned from publishing material.

[26]Dennis Brutus, "6", *Letters to Martha* (London: Heinemann, 1968) 7. Also printed in *A Simple Lust* (1973: London: Heinemann, 1984) 57.

[27]Brutus, "5" *Letters to Martha*, 6, and *A Simple Lust*, 56-57.

[28]Brutus, "17" and "18" *Letters to Martha,* 18-19, and *A Simple Lust*, 65-67.

[29]Brutus, "Longing," *Letters to Martha*, 1, and *A Simple Lust*, 46.

[30]Breytenbach's first prison poems were published as *Voetskrif* ("Footscript") while he was still in prison. As he was not allowed to revise his poems, or to communicate with his publishers at the time, and since his poems were censored by his interrogators, Breytenbach himself will not endorse this text as an acceptable edition.

[31]Breytenbach, 154-155.

[32]See Emile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miama Press, 1971) 224: "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language also establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being." Not only does Breytenbach (or anyone else) establish his subject position by employing the pronoun "I", the mutability of language allows for a mutable concept of self. Breytenbach can take up multiple subject positions; thus, he is the writer, the author, the prisoner, Afrikaner, white, colourless, and/or a surrealist within the context of a single paragraph.

[33]See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Screen* 20.1 (1979): 19: "...the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society."

[34]Breytenbach, 155.

[35]Breytenbach, 269.

[36]Breytenbach, 277-278. For a more complete list of prison slang, see Appendix A.

[37]Breytenbach, 357. Also printed in Breyten Breytenbach, *In Africa even the flies are happy*, trans. Denis Hirson (London: John Calder, 1976) 92-95. This edition includes the original poem in Afrikaans. For both versions, see Appendix C.

[38]Oswald Mtshali, "A Song for South Africa," *Fireflames* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Shuter & Shooter (Pty) Ltd., 1980) 27-28. This is an abridged version of an earlier poem, "In the Island of Heroes," *South African Voices* (Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Studies and Research Center in association with Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, 1975) 9-11. The poem was originally written in Zulu.

[39]Mtshali wrote the poem in response to a performance he saw of a musical play, *Shanti*.

[40]Walter Sisulu formed the ANC Youth League which ended the ANC's policy of strictly passive resistance. See note 2.

[41]Mtshali, 28, ll. 41-53:

> From the sea came the cries of dolphins and porpoises
> and the lamentations of the prisoners' children,
> "Oh! you creatures of the Sea,
> when will you bring back our fathers
> from the Island of Sorrow?"
>
> The swordfish leaped in a parabola
> over the surface of the Sea;
> the sharks and whales replied,
> 'Beloved children of Africa, be ready,
> take courage,
> the time is near,
> freedom will soon be yours.'

[42]Mtshali, see lines quoted above.

[43]Ilva MacKay, "Mandela and all Comrades in prison," *Malibongwe. ANC Women: Poetry is Also Their Weapon* ([Johannesburg]: n.p., [1980]) 79.

Chapter Three

[1]Dennis Brutus, "By the Waters of Babylon," *Seven South African Poets*, ed. Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1971) 18.

[2]Barry Feinberg, Introduction, *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems*, 17-18.

[3]Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1965) 101.

[4]Dennis Brutus, "A troubadour, I traverse all my land," *A Simple Lust,* 2. See Cosmo Pieterse's Interview with Dennis Brutus, African Writers Talking, 54-55 for a discussion of Brutus' troubadour and Don Quixote motifs.

[5]Brutus, "I will be the world's troubadour," *Stubborn Hope,* 22-23.

[6]Brutus, "I *am* the exile," *A Simple Lust*, 137.

[7]Pieterse, 56.

[8]Pieterse, 55-56.

[9]Dennis Brutus, "Now that we conquer and dominate time," *A Simple Lust,* 95.

[10]Brutus, "Sherds," *Stubborn Hope,* 30-31. "Sherds" is a variation of "shards" and is a derivative of "potsherds,"

meaning the pieces of a broken earthenware pot.

[11]See Brutus, "What thrusts of loneliness," *Stubborn Hope,* 32-33. For other homesickness poems see "November Sunlight silvers my grimy panes," *A Simple Lust,* 103, and inability to adapt to new environments, see "Having fled, I play a fugitive's jealousy," *Stubborn Hope,* 65.

[12]Brutus, "Not in my hands," *Stubborn Hope,* 79.

[13]Brutus, "Eight years in exile," *A Simple Lust,* 119.

[14]Nadine Gordimer, "English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa," *Aspects of South African Literature*, 114.

[15]Brutus, "The impregnation of our air," *A Simple Lust*, 78.

[16]Brutus, "Sequence for South Africa," *Stubborn Hope*, 93-94.

[17]Brutus, "There are no people left in my country," *Stubborn Hope,* 41.

[18]Thompson, 74.

[19]Brutus, "In my part of the world," *Stubborn Hope*, 36. See Appendix C.

[20]Pieterse, 37.

[21]Brutus, "I am alien in Africa and everywhere," *A Simple Lust*, 121.

[22]See Brutus "Our allies are exiles," *Stubborn Hope,* 84-85.

[23]Alvarez-Pereyre, 241.

[24]Cosmo Pieterse, Introduction, *Seven South African Poets*, xii.

[25]Alvarez-Pereyre, 149.

[26]Cosmo Pieterse, "Love Exile Land," *Echoes and Choruses: "Ballad of the Cells" and Selected Shorter Poems* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies Africa Program, 1974) 41. See also Pieterse's poem, "Exile," *Present Lives, Future Becoming* (London: Hickey Press, 1974) 1. See also Alvarez-Pereyre, 152 for a thorough commentary on this poem. See Appendix C for complete poem.

[27]Alvarez-Pereyre, 156.

[28]Authur Nortje, "Poem: South Africa," *Dead Roots* (London: Heinemann, 1973) 114.

[29]Nkosi, 123.

[30]M.J.F. Chapman, "Arthur Nortje: Poet of Exile," *English in Africa* 5.1 (1978): 60.

[31]Charles Dameron, "Arthur Nortje: Craftsman for His Muse," *Aspects in South African Literature,* 160.

[32]See Nortje, "Near-mad," 69, "Message from an LSD eater," 80, "Quiet desperation," 99, and "Questions and Answers," 138-141.

[33]Nortje, "The long silence," 24.

[34]André Brink, n.t. *Worldview*, Sept. 1982, as quoted in *Index on Censorship* 13 (1983): 11.

[35]Nortje, "Freedom," 98.

[36]Brutus is much older than Nortje was and was once his English teacher. Many of Nortje's early poems show his debt to Brutus in form and imagery. See Alvarez-Pereyre, Chapter 9, 130-169.

[37]For example, Nortje's admiration comes across in the following stanza:

> 36,000 feet above the Atlantic
> I heard an account of how they had shot
> a running man in the stomach. But what isn't told
> is how a warder kicked the stitches open
> on a little-known island prison which used to be
> a guano rock in a sea of diamond blue.

[38]Nortje, "Autopsy," 52-54.

[39]Stephen Gray, "Stephen Gray Interviews Sipho Sepamla," 258.

[40]Sipho Sepamla, "The Exile," *Hurry Up to It!* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975) 15.

[41]The poems read at this symposium were subsequently published in a volume, Bernth Lindfors, ed., *South African Voices* (Austin, Texas: African and Afro-American Studies and Research center in Association with the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1975).

[42]Oswald Mtshali, "Panel on Contemporary South African Poetry," *Contemporary Black South African Literature: A Symposium,* ed. Bernth Lindfors (1976: Washington: Three Continents Press, Inc., 1984) 66-67. Please note that at

this symposium both Mongane Wally Serote and Oswald Mtshali announced their intentions to return to South Africa. Their poetry shall be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four

[1]Nadine Gordimer, "English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa," *Aspects of South African Literature*, 118-119.

[2]Oswald Mtshali, "Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What it Means," *Aspects of South African Literature,* 122.

[3]The 1960 Sharpeville massacre and the 1976 Soweto Riots both led to large outpourings of protest poetry, especially among black poets, some of which will be discussed in this chapter.

[4]The Sharpeville and Langa massacres occurred on March 21, 1960, when two different police groups panicked and fired on unarmed protesters.

[5]C.J. Driver, "Afternoon in an African Township," *Seven South African Poets*, 54.

[6]Jennifer Davids, "Location Fires," *Searching for Words* (n.p.: Mantis Editions of Southern African Poets, 1974) 2.

[7]These journals are not all currently published. As the nationalist government has bans on certain journals, or on certain of their issues, such as *Classic* and *Staffrider*, for being too subversive, new journals are founded to replace them.

[8]Michael Vaughan, "*Staffrider* and directions within comtemporary South African literature," *Literature and Society in South Africa*, ed. Landeg White and Tim Couzens (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1984) 196.

[9]Sipho Sepamla, "About Staffrider," *Soweto Poetry*, 198. It is important to note that although black writers often appear to be dependent on white publishers and editors, Sipho Sepamla has edited both *Staffrider*, *New Classic*, and *S'ketsh*. Thus, blacks are not completely without access to powerful positions within the publishing industry, although it remains difficult for most black writers.

[10]Motshile Nthodi, "Staffrider," *Staffrider* 1.1 (March 1978): 28 as quoted in Vaughan, 200-202.

[11]Mazisi Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great. A Zulu Epic*, trans. by the author (1979: London: Heinemann, 1984). Also see Mazisi Kunene, *Anthem of the Decades*, trans. by author (1981: London: Heinemann, 1986).

[12]Mazisi Kunene, "The Screams," *Poems of Black Africa*, ed. Wole Soyinka (1975: London: Heinemann, 1985) 207.

[13]Alvarez-Pereyre, 127-128.

[14]Alvarez-Pereyre, 38-39.

[15]Lerato Kumalo, "Childhood in Soweto," *Malibongwe* 40-41.

[16]Ilva Mackay, "Mayibuye," *Malibongwe,* 46. See Appendix C.

[17]Michael Chapman, "Interview with Mongane Serote (1980)" *Soweto Poetry,* 113. Serote's first four collections of poetry are: *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972), *Tsetlo* (1974), *No Baby Must Weep* (1975), and *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978).

[18]Mongane Wally Serote, "Ode to Somebody," *Tsetlo* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1974) 13.

[19]Serote, "A Sleeping Black Boy," *Tsetlo,* 37.

[20]Mongane Serote, "Time has run out," *the night keeps winking* (Gaborone, Botswana: Medu Art Ensemble, 1982) 5.

[21]Serote, "Amen! Alexandra," *Tsetlo,* 14.

[22]Wally Serote, "What's in this Black 'Shit'," *Poets to the People*, 69-70. See Appendix C.

[23]Serote, 71-72.

[24]Alvarez-Pereyre, 190.

[25]Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 117.

[26]Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of Afrian Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1981) 81.

[27]Alvarez-Pereyre, 109.

[28]Wopko Jensma, "Joburg Spiritual," *Sing for Our Execution* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press Ltd., 1973) 38. See Appendix C.

[29]Jensma, 39.

[30]Alvarez-Pereyre, 105.

[31]Jensma, "Pullin Strong at Eleven-Forty-Five," *Sing for Our Execution,* 19-21.

[32]Cherry Clayton, "Mafika Gwala's *Jol'iinkomo*: Straddling Praise Song and Jive," *Soweto Poetry,* 84.

[33]Mafika Pascal Gwala, "The 'Chewing' of her Time," *It's gettin late, and other poems from Ophir*, ed. Walter Saunders and Peter Horn (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1974) n. pag. No. 36.

[34]M. Pascal Gwala, "Gumba, Gumba, Gumba," *Black Poets in South Africa*, ed. Robert Royston (1973: London: Heinemann, 1978) 54-56. See Appendix C.

[35]Peter Rodda, ed., "Poetry under Apartheid," 91.

[36]Alvarez-Pereyre, 185.

[37]Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, "Boy on a Swing," *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (New York: The Third Press, 1972) 5. Please note there are some additions and deletions to the American edition from the 1971 South African first edition.

[38]Mtshali, "The Washerwoman's Prayer," *Sounds,* 7.

[39]Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Artistic and Political Mirage: Mtshali's *Sound of a Cowhide Drum*," *Soweto Poetry,* 192.

[40]Ndebele, 192.

[41]Mtshali, "The Detribalized," *Sounds,* 52-53.

[42]Oswald Mtshali, "Panel on Contemporary South African Poetry," *Comtemporary Black South African Literature: A Symposium*, 15.

[43]Oswald Mtshali, "This Poem is for Ben," *Fireflames*, 14.

[44]*S'ketsh* is a journal of black dramatic literature; *New Classic* is both poetry and short stories.

[45]Sepamla has had one volume of poetry, *The Soweto I Love*, and his first novel, *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, banned. Despite this, Sepamla himself has never been banned and in 1984 was finally allowed a passport to visit Europe and the United States and to publish subsequent articles.

[46]Sipho Sepamla, "Measure for Measure," *The Soweto I Love* (London & Cape Town: Rex Collings with David Philip, 1977) 14.

[47]Sipho Sepamla, "Children of the Earth," *Children of the Earth*, 67-68. See Appendix C.

[48]Mothobi Mutloatse, "Sepamla tightens the Loose Screws: Review of Sipho Sepamla's *The Blues is You in Me,*"

Soweto Poetry, 81. "Tsotsi-taal" is a combination of English and Afrikaans spoken by township robber-gangs; often the linguistic interplay is meaningless as words and sounds are used for rhyming or rhythmic effects. Township Xhosa is a dialect of tribal Xhosa which is spoken in the townships and which has been influence by other Bantu languages, such as Zulu, and by English.

[49]Sipho Sepamla, "The Bookshop," *Hurry Up To It!* 13-14.

[50]Sepamla, "To Whom It May Concern," 9.

[51]Sepamla, "The Blues is You in Me," *The Blues is You in Me*, (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1976) 70-71, and "The Soweto Blues," *Children of the Earth*, 52-53.

[53]Alvarez-Pereyre, 225.

[54]Sepamla, "When I Lost Slum Life," *The Soweto I Love,* 18-19.

Chapter Five

[1]Sipho Sepamla, "Talk to the Peach Tree," *The Soweto I Love*, 34-35.

[2]Geoffrey Haresnape, "The Creative Artist in Contemporary South Africa," *English in Africa* 8.1 (1981): 49.

[3]See Chapter 2, note 30 for Breytenbach. Dennis Brutus' *Thoughts Abroad* (Austin Texas: Troubadour Press, 1970) was published under the pseudonym of John Bruin. While still living in South Africa under house arrest, however, he was not permitted to compose poems. His exile poetry is also prohibited in South Africa.

[4]William A. Hachten and C. Anthony Giffard, *The Press and Apartheid. Repression and Propaganda in South Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 179.

[5]Donald Woods, "South Africa: Black Editors Out," *Index on Censorship* 10.3 (Jun 1981): 33.

[6]Hachten, 157-158.

[7]Christopher Hope, "Visible Jailers," *Index on Censorship* 11. 4 (Aug 1982): 8.

[8]Watson, 13.

[9]Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Heinemann, 1978) 20-24.

[10]Sipho Sepamla, "Civilization Aha," *The Soweto I Love,* 27.

[11]Hachten and Giffard, ix and 263.

[12]Cosmo Pieterse's interview with Ezekiele Mphahlele, (n.t.) *African Writers Talking,* 101-112.

[13]Alvarez-Pereyre, 170.

[14]Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks,* 2.

[15]Arthur Nortje, "Questions and answers," *Dead Roots,* 139.

[16]Hachten and Giffard, 264.

[17]See note 3.

[18]Hachten and Giffard, 87.

[19]Hachten and Giffard, 172.

[20]Hatchen and Giffard, 144. Poets and writers expelled under the Suppression of Communism Act include Mazisi Kunene, Dennis Brutus, Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, and Cosmo Pieterse.

[21]Hachten and Giffard, 115.

[22]Nadine Gordimer, "New Black Poetry in South Africa," *The Black Interpreters. Notes on African Writing* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press Ltd., 1973) 52.

[23]Ursula A. Barnett, "Interview with Oswald Mtshali," *Soweto Poetry*, 102.

[24]Hachten and Giffard, 112.

[25]Colin Garder, "Brutus and Shakespeare," *Research in African Literature* 15 (1984): 354.

[26]Andre Brink, "The Failure of Censorship," *Index on Censorship* 10. 6 (Dec. 1981): 10.

[27]"Ravan Press Petrol-Bombed," *Index on Censorship* 16.5 (May 1987): 3.

[28]Sipho Sepamla, "The Price of Being a Writer," *Index on Censorship* 11.4 (1982): 15.

[29]Stephen Gray, "Interviews Sipho Sepamla," 257-262.

[30]Essop Patel, "Don Mattera: Out of the Twilight," *Index on Censorship* 13 (1983): 8-9.

[31]Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 121.

[32]Pitika Ntuli, "Under the censor's guilotine," *Index on Censorship* 15.9 (Oct. 1986): 19. See Appendix C.

[33]Nadine Gordimer, "New Forms of Strategy -- No Change of Heart," *Critical Arts* 1.2 (June 1980): 27. Reprinted in *Index on Censorship* 10.1 (Feb. 1981).

[34]"Writers and Repression," *Index on Censorship* 13.5 (Oct. 1984): 28.

[35]Andre P. Brink, "Censorship and the Author," *Critical Arts* 1.2 (Jun. 1980): 26.

[36]Nadine Gordimer, "English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa," *Aspects*, 116:

> I believe these new young black writers instinctively attempt poetry rather than prose because poetry is the means of literary expression least accessible to the rules-of-thumb employed by the Censorship Board.

[37]Hatchen and Giffard, 173.

[38]Michael Chapman, ed. *Soweto Poetry*, 155.

[39]Mongane Wally Serote, *No Baby Must Weep*, 58-61. The same section of the poem is published as "I can Say," *A New Book of African Verse*, ed. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1984) 92-94, and *South African Voices*, 14-15.

[40]Mongange Wally Serote, *Behold Mama, Flowers*, 60-61.

[41]Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 35.

[42]Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 76.

[43]Gray, 257, and Thompson, 74.

[44]Oswald Mtshali, "Black Poetry in South Africa: What it Means," *Aspects*, 125-126.

[45]Oswald Mtshali, "A Long Poem," *Fireflames*, 63.

[46]Wally Serote, "What can the World Learn from South African Literature?" *Sechaba* (July 1986): 18.

[47]Biko, 46.

[48]Biko, 98.

APPENDIX A:

GLOSSARY OF SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGE

This glossary includes terms from Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and from "kitchen-kaffir." It also includes abbreviations, anachronisms, and slang terms which are relevant to the political situation in South African or which are commonly found in South African poems. The main sources are Jean Branford, *A Dictionary of South African English* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978) and William A. Hachten and C. Anthony Giffard, *The Press and Apartheid: Repression and Propaganda in South Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). I have also used Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like* for definitions of Black Consciousness terminology.

African	The term by which the indigenous black population is generally known; a replacement for "non-white."
Afrikaans	One of the two official languages, used by Afrikaners (60% of total white pop.) and by most Coloureds. Evolved from Cape Dutch.
Afrikaner	A South African citizen of Dutch descent, whose home language is Afrikaans.
Afrikanerism	A linguistic usage transferred from Afrikaans to English.
Alex	Alexandra: a black ghetto outside Johannesburg. Township from which Wally Serote originated.
Amandla (ngawetu)	"Power (is ours)": popular slogan of the ANC.
ANC	African National Congress: the main organization of blacks and coloureds whose goal is to end apartheid. The ANC is banned in South Africa.
Apartheid	"Separateness": the political policy of separate development for all races. Adopted since 1948 by the Nationalist Government.
Baas	"Master": how an African must address a white.
Basskap	"Boss-ship": mastery in the political sense of white supremacy.

Bandiet — (Plural form) Long-term prisoner, also known as mugus, skebengas, or *skollies*.

Banning — An action by the Minister of Justice to restrict a person's freedom of movement, association, and expression. It sometimes includes house arrest; organizations and publications may also be banned.

Bantu — The term by which the South African Government designates all black Africans. Also a group of related languages spoken by Central and Southern Africans. In Zulu, "bantu!" can also mean "what a shame!".

Bantustans — So-called "tribal lands" or the independent African homelands; frequently derogatory.

Barberton — Homebrewed beer sold in *shebeens* which eventually poisons the drinker's body and drives him insane.

Black — Steve Biko defines blacks "as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations."
-I Write What I Like, 48

Black Consciousness — Steve Biko defines it as "to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth."
-I Write What I Like, 29

Boer — An Afrikaner; also slang term for a prison guard or policeman; pejorative.

Classic — See *Opir*.

Clearlink — Variant of Afrikaans "kleurling": Coloured.

Clifton Beach — "Whites Only" beach in Cape Town.

Coloured	A South African of mixed racial descent, speaking either Afrikaans or English. Also a racial classification under the Populations Registration Act.
Comb mondfluitjie	Comb used as a mouth organ.
Coolie	Offensive term of address or reference to an Indian.
Coon	Offensive term of address or reference to an African.
Dagga	Marijuana or hashish.
Dingaan's Day	December 16th, anniversary of Afrikaner victory over the Zulus (Dingaan was the Zulu king who was defeated); also called *Blood River Day*.
Dongas	Ditches (usually dry).
Dumile	Sculptor.
ESSA	English-Speaking South Africans.
Freedom Charter	The charter of the ANC which sets out its goals and demands for equal rights for all South Africans, black and white.
Gogog harp	A rudimentary harp made from a petrol can and a bow, the cord of which is plucked.
Gumba-gumba	Location slang, associated with jazz and jive.
Hippo	Armoured police vehicle; also called *kwela-kwela.*
Homelands	Areas designated by the government as rural homes for various African tribal groups.
"I Write What I Like"	Title of a series of articles published in the SASO newsletter by Steve Biko under the pseudonym "Frank Talk."
Imbongo	Zulu bards who compose praise poetry.
Isiqubhu	Drum
Izibongo	Generic term for (Zulu) praise song or poetry; chanted by *imbongi* in honour of chief or king.

Joburg	Johannesburg
Kaffir	Originally referred to a member of the Xhosa tribe. Pejorative name for blacks (like "nigger"), usually used by Afrikaners; others are: *hotnot* (derivative of Hottentot), *koelie* (Indian - coolie), *houtkop* (blockhead), *outa* (elderly coloured man-servant), *aia* (child's coloured female nurse), *jong* (young fellow, boy), *meid* (coloured girl), *klong* (black servant boy), and *skepsel* (creature).
Kitchen-Kaffir	A pidgin language composed of Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, and English.
Kwashiorkor	Children's disease caused by protein deficiency; often fatal.
Location	A segregated area on the outskirts of a town or city set aside for black housing and accommodation, which most whites require a permit to enter.
Makana Island	Another name for Robben Island, the prison fortress where political prisoners like Nelson Mandela are kept.
Mankantshana	Colloquial name for a traditional beer; other beers and alcoholic concoctions are: *mokoko outshebileng, mquambothi, mbamba, sebapa le mesenke, mayi-mayi, patlama ke-ho-seshe,* and a Zulu beer called *utshwalu.* Also see *barberton.*
Mankunku	A musician
Match-box	Tiny outhouse.
Mayibuye i Afrika	"Come back Africa": common cry or motto of ANC; also title of official ANC song.
Mbaqanga	Soweto-originated mixture of jazz and Zulu music.
Meal-stop	A common punishment in prison in which the prisoner is forced to fast.
Mealie-cruncher	An offensive term for Afrikaner of lower class; also called *crunchie, hairy* (back), *krans athlete,* and *Kransie* (rock spider).

Mealie Meal	Ground maize, corn: staple food of much of the South African population.
Meneer	Sir
Mieliepap	Maize porridge
Mielies	Maize
National Party	Ruling party of South Africa since 1948, representing almost exclusively Afrikaner interests.
Non-white	Steve Biko defines it as: "If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white." - *I Write What I Like*, 48.
Okehela	European (white) support group for the ANC.
Ophir	(1967-1976) one of numerous Johannesburg poetry journals which published political poems by such people as Serote, Mtshali, Gwala, and Jensma. Others are: *Fighting Talk, The New African, Classic, Africa South, Purple Renoster, Staffrider, Transition*, etc.
Oupa	Afrikaans for grandfather or old man.
Outee	Outlaw.
PAC	Pan-African Congress. Outlawed political party representing African interests.
Pollsmoor	Cape Town Prison.
Poqo	Xhosa word for "pure", a 1962 resistance group which formed the armed wing of the PAC.
Republic Day	May 31st, the anniversary of the Treaty of Vereeniging, which ended the Boer War
Robben Island	A small island in Cape Bay used as a prison.
Robots	Traffic lights.
Saracens	Armoured cars that patrol the African townships to impose order and sometimes terror.

Sechaba	The journal which acts as the offical mouthpiece of ANC policies.
Sestigers	(From *sestig,* "sixty"), a group of 1960's Afrikaans writers who wanted to break with the conformism of the Afrikaner culture. The group included Breyten Breytenbach.
Sharpeville Massacre	On March 21, 1960 police fired on peaceful black demonstrators in the Sharpeville Township, wounding 200. On the same day police fired on demonstrators in Langa Township.
Shebeen	Term of Irish origin for an illegal drinking establishment in a township.
Shebeen queen	A black woman who runs the shebeen (also --- king).
Sixpence	Pejorative name for blacks.
Slukked	From Afrikaans "sluk", to swallow, meaning to be taken in, cheated.
SOWETO	Acronym for South West Townships; with a population of 3/4 million, it is the largest black township.
Spare-diet	Prison punishment in which one is placed on a diet of rice-water.
Special Branch	A branch of the police who investigate political as opposed to civilian matters.
Staffrider	Literally, one who boards the train at the last minute and sits on the roof or hangs from the side to get a free ride to and from the white city and the townships; also a multiracial South African literary magazine stated in 1978 in which numerous young poets have been published in English and in vernacular languages.
Standpunte	An Afrikaner literary journal.
Taal	Afrikaans language (also tongue, speech).
Thoko	A singer.
Township	Area set aside for urban coloureds and

	Africans, usually located near a white city.
Township Art	Sometimes used perjoratively to denigrate black poetry, music, etc. Used here simply to distinguish certain thematic similarities in works.
Tsotsis	Young thugs, thieves, who travel in gangs of three or four, usually flashily dressed and armed with a knife or another weapon. (Also called *skolly*).
Umkonto We Sizwe	"The spear of the nation": name for the armed units of the banned ANC. .
Umqangala	Mouth harp.
Verkrampte	Narrow-minded or bigoted; applied to ultraconservative Afrikaners.
Verligte	Broad-minded or enlightened; applied to more flexible Afrikaners.
Voetsak	Go away, be off: usually spoken to dogs, offensive to humans.
Volk	Afrikaans word for "the people" or "the nation": refers to Afrikaner nationalism.

APPENDIX B

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1931

LEGISLATION: Entertainment (Censorship) Act

1950

LEGISLATION: Suppression of Communism Act

1953-1959

LEGISLATION: Bantu Education Acts

1955

HISTORICAL EVENTS: ANC Freedom Charter

1956

LEGISLATION: Riotous Assemblies Act

1959

LEGISLATION: Prison Act
- Extension of University Education Act

POETS' LIVES: Mazisi Kunene exiled to London

1960

LEGISLATION: Unlawful Organizations Act

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Sharpeville Massacre
- ANC and PAC banned
- Sobukwe detained

1961

POETS' LIVES: Barry Feinberg exiled to London
- Breyten Breytenbach exiled to Paris

1962

LEGISLATION: Sabotage Act

POETS' LIVES: Cosmo Pieterse banned under Riotous
- Assembly Act

1963

LEGISLATION: General Law Amendment Act
- Publications and Entertainments Act

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Formation of Publications Control Board which may ban both the content of books and the Authors themselves
- Mandela sent to Robben Island
- *The Classic* begins publication

POETS' LIVES: Dennis Brutus arrested; he escapes only to be shot and recaptured at a later date

1964

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Rivonia Trials

POETS' LIVES: C.J. Driver detained (90 days), exiled to England
- Brutus sent to Robben Island (18 months)
- Pieterse exiled to London

1965

POETS' LIVES: Brutus placed under house arrest (1 year)

1966

POETS' LIVES: Brutus exiled to London
- Arthur Nortje exiled to London
- Kunene, Mphahlele, Nkosi, Pieterse, Can Themba, and Dennis Brutus banned under the Suppression of Communism Act

1967

LEGISLATION: Terrorism Act

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Formation of *Ophir*

1968

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Steve Biko forms South African Students Association (SASO)

POETS' LIVES: Brutus publishes *Letters to Martha*, which is banned in South Africa

1969

POETS' LIVES: Wally Serote imprisoned under Terrorist Act (9 months, released without being charged)

1970

POETS' LIVES: Arthur Nortje commits suicide just before he was to be deported from U.K.
- Kunene publishes *Zulu Poems* (banned)

1971

POETS' LIVES: Pieterse edits *Seven South African Poets* (banned)
- Oswald Mtshali publishes *sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, making record sales

1972

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Ravan Press founded; promotes Black Literature
- National Black Theatre Festival

POETS' LIVES: James Matthews and Gladys Thomas publish *Cry Rage!* (banned)
- Serote publishes *Yakhal'inkomo*

1973

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Strikes in Durban

POETS' LIVES: Nortje's *Dead Roots* posthumously published
- Brutus publishes *A Simple Lust*

1974

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Black Renaissance Convention
- Angola and Mozambique decolonized

POETS' LIVES: Anthologies *Black Voices Shout* and *Poets to the People* banned
- Serote publishes *Tsetlo*
- Jennifer Davids publishes *Searching for Words*

1975

POETS' LIVES: Breytenbach arrested when he returns to South Africa
- *South African Voices* (Texas Symposium on Contemporary African Writing) banned
- Serote publishes *No Baby Must Weep*
- Serote and Mtshali exiled in New York; Mtshali eventually returns to South Africa

1976

HISTORICAL EVENTS: June 16, Soweto children demonstrate against being taught in Afrikaans; Police fire on the children
- *Ophir* banned

- Sipho Sepamla becomes editor of the *New Classic*

POETS' LIVES: Sepamla publishes *Hurry Up To It!*

1977

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Formation of Medupe Writers Association
- *The World* (newspaper) banned
- Steve Biko dies in detention

POETS' LIVES: Sepamla publishes *The Soweto I Love*
- Pascal Gwala publishes *Jol'iinkomo*

1978

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Medupe banned
- Ravan Press launches *Staffrider*

POETS' LIVES: Serote publishes *Behold Mama, Flowers*
- Brutus publishes *Stubborn Hope*

1979

POETS' LIVES: Kunene publishes *Emperor Shaka the Great*
- Serote receives fine arts degree from Columbia University and moves to Gaberone, Botswana.

1980

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Cape Town Conference on Censorship
- Zimbabwe independence
- *Sunday Post* (newspaper) banned

POETS' LIVES: Mtshali publishes *Fireflames* (banned)

1981

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Multiracial Johannesburg Centre PEN disbands
- Black African Writers Association formed

POETS' LIVES: Christopher Hope publishes *In the Country of the Black Pig*

1982

POETS' LIVES: Breytenbach released from prison

1983

POETS' LIVES: Pieterse teaching in Zimbabwe
- Brutus under threat of deportation from

the United States

1984

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Albertina Sisulu, Walter Sisulu's wife, is sentenced to two years in prison
- Publications Control Board removes ANC Freedom Charter from the banned list.

POETS' LIVES: Breytenbach publishes *Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*; refuses Herzog Award
- Sepamla and Breytenbach attend *Index on Censorship*'s conference in London on Jun. 16-17

1985

LEGISLATION: New Constitution gives limited Franchise to Coloureds and Indians
- State of Emergency declared, Jul. 20

HISTORICAL EVENTS: *The Rand Daily Mail* (newspaper) closes
- Alex La Guma, journalist and novelist dies in Cuba.

1986

LEGISLATION: On Dec. 11, the Public Safety Act (953) is extended to provide harsh new press controls

HISTORICAL EVENTS: State of Emergency declared Jun. 12
- extensive restricts placed on the press

POETS' LIVES: Serote moves to London to work for ANC full-time

1987

HISTORICAL EVENTS: Ravan Press offices vandalized and bombed
- Gold miners' strike

POETS' LIVES: Breytenbach is refused a visa to visit South Africa on the grounds of his conviction and his subversive history
- Serote publishes a new poem, *A Tough Tale*

APPENDIX C

ANTHOLOGY OF SELECTED POEMS

I. Christopher Hope: "In the Middle of Nowhere"

They will not see how much we care for them,
how we bend under their tantrums, live for them,
only, like battered wives, decorated with bruises
yet longing to kiss the handcuffs once again.
Well, let them believe the future lies in wait
for us like a bomb in a Christmas box, primed
under wraps and humming in its tinsel. Our duty
is to stand against the hopeless armies their dreams
recruit, fly-by-night guerrillas with bad maps
desperate for the coming dawn and dying
for that heaven their obsolete manuals depict
as an eternal rainy season when the weather
will close in for good, the cover thicken
and the long-awaited push begin. To that end
our armoured herds, the hard-nosed hippos
grazing the furthest barbed-wire fences bossed
by shorn conscripts squatting between patrols,
snatching a freckled shade under the thorn trees,
nervous circle of thumb and forefinger around
the barrel, raising stiff rifles between
their knees. They are our sons ... Is there
nothing we will not do for them? Of course,
they have too many goats and if, as they say,
time is on their side then they'd better remember
that in time nothing's sharper than a sheep's tooth.
Enough talk of freedom - irrigate! We offer a garden
fat with confidence where the newly christened flowers,
glaucoma and kwashiorkor, replace the sickening blooms
of recent memory. And what do they want?
They want us dead. We teach them how
to fall asleep repeating - Disused tractors rust -
a prayer powerful as diesel, only to know deep down
they go on dreaming of driving us into the sea,
not caring even to notice how well we swim
or that we are all in the middle of nowhere.
Lately they have taken fervently to celebrating
the anniversaries of their cruellest chiefs;
naked engines they were, thudding in their black grease,
terrible pistons stamping the heads of the tribes.
See how time is eating, sucking on the pinched glass
nipple, a supper of sand. They would literally
starve to see us dead, driven by a locust logic
they feed on everything that promises. See,
they say, the butcher-bird dreams in the thorn tree,
the sun drills his dull, black coat dead-centre,
his hook bill curves over his neat shirt front
and is packed with teeth, and in his eye's a glitter
no one would mistake for patience in bank managers

or hangmen. In the face of all our terrible effort
their contempt goes on steaming like a mean soup.
Very well then, we must swallow it, take it
lying down if needs be and show that on it
we can more than survive. Somehow, we must soldier on
Dying will be the last thing we do for them.

II. Wopko Jensma "Joburg Spiritual"

1
we all sat roun a faia
a cops
squadcar hollar a stop
a lump
a fool we don't run but
sit an
grin. hell, Lod, i saw'm
thump da nightwatch down
his head a ball o'blood
i a white: we don't want
to see
you here again. an what
dat ma
bitch scuttled round da
cona. i
my pals all gon, o Lod

2
i saw her sit on a sidewalk
i saw her spit blodd in a gutter
i saw her thorns in a burnt flesh
i saw her stump for a foot
i saw her clutch a stick
i saw her eyes grin toothless
i see her cut her own throat
i see her corpse lie in Dark City
i see her save a multitude

3
on my way to St. Peter's Gate
i see a sign looming up --
WELCOME TO SOWETO:
air-conditioned rooms with baths
we can recommend the soap --

4
he sits in glory
a red robe
a golden throne
a thorn crown
the halo
the cross
the works

on his farm
khaki shorts
chev truck
barbed wire
smoke ring fencing pole
the works

5
today is tuesday
yesterday was monday
tomorrow will be wednesday
after that another day

time after time the sea
collapses to certain death
on its burning beaches
time after time our prime
minister proclaims lasting peace
and nails sharpeville on yet
another burning cross

today is dingaan's day
yesterday was republic day
tomorrow will be an ordinary day
after that a similar day

III. Sipho Sepamla "Mkize"

Le fellow-ndini uMkize is a clown
you know he can't outgrow ubugoduka
he was landed here from Transkei
via ijoini
uTeba ngamanye amazwi
then wathi break i-contact yakhe
don't ask me how
by luck wathi xwa indawo kwsSis Jane

uSis Jane ke is a beautiful soul
anytime
amongst other things
she owns i-skilpad

le clever-ndini uMkize
because akana-shame
takes this skilpad
goes to his favourite shebeen
dumps it on the table
and says kwi-shebeen queen
what's your offer
just like that

poor thing she thought uvelelwe
she says to him
drink on the house my dear

two days straight

days later
uSis Jane went to recover eso-skilpad
walontya i-property kamkize out of a window

uMkize is in shit-street ngoku
he goes from place to place
efuna i-accommodation

serves him right

IV. Mongane Wally Serote "What's in This Black 'Shit'"

It is not the steaming little rot
In the toilet bucket,
It is the upheaval of the bowels
Bleeding and coming out through the mouth
And swallowing back
Rolling in the mouth
Feeling its taste and wondering what's next like it.

Now I'm talking about this;
"Shit" you hear an old woman say,
Right there, squeezed in her little match-box
With her fatness and gigantic life experience,
Which makes her a child,
'Cause the next day she's right there,
Right there serving tea to the woman
Who's lying in bed at 10 a.m. sick with wealth,
Which she's prepared to give her life for
"Rather than you marry my son or daughter."

This "Shit" can take the form of action
My younger sister under the full weight of my father,
And her face colliding with his steel hand,
"'Cause she spilled sugar that I work so hard for,"
He says, not feeling satisfied with the damage his hands
Do to my yelling little sister.

I'm learning to pronounce this "Shit" well,
Since the other day,
At the pass office,
When I went to get employment,
The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg,
So I said, hard and with all my might, "Shit!"
I felt a little better;
But what's good is, I said it in his face.
A thing my father wouldn't dare do.

That's what's in this black "Shit".

V. Dennis Brutus "Robben Island Sequence"

I
neonbright orange
vermillion
on the chopped broken slate
that gravelled the path and yard
bright orange was the red blood
freshly spilt where the prisoners had passed;
and bright red
pinkbright red and light
the blood on the light sand by the sea
the pale lightyellow seas and
in the light bright airy air
lightwoven, seawoven, spraywoven air
of sunlight by the beach where we worked

where the bright blade-edges of the rocks
jutted like chisels from the squatting rocks
the keen fine edges whitening to thinness
from the lightbrown masses of the sunlit rocks,
washed around by swirls on rushing wave water,
lightgreen or colourless, transparent with a hint of light:

on the sharp pale whitening edges
our blood showed light and pink,
our gashed soles winced from the fine barely felt slashes,
that lacerated afterwards:
the bloody flow
thinned to thin pink strings dangling
as we hobbled through the wet clinging sands
or we discovered surprised
in some quiet backwater pool
the thick flow of blood uncoiling
from a skein to thick dark red strands.

The menace of that bright day was clear as the blade of a
knife;
from the blade edges of the rocks,
from the piercing brilliance of the day,
the incisive thrust of the clear air into the lungs
the salt-stinging brightness of sky and light on the eyes:
from the clear image, bronze-sharp lines of Kleynhans
laughing
khaki-ed. uniformed. with his foot on the neck of the
convict who had fallen,
holding his head under water in the pool where he had fallen
while the man thrashed helplessly
and the bubbles gurgled
and the air glinted dully on lethal gunbutts,
the day was brilliant with the threat of death.

II
sitting on the damp sand
in sand-powdered windpuff,

the treetops still grey in the early morning air
and dew still hanging tree-high,
to come to the beginning of the day
and small barely-conscious illicit greetings
to settle to a shape of mind, of thought,
and inhabit a body to its extremities:
to be a prisoner, a political victim,
to be a some-time fighter, to endure --
find reserves of good cheer, of composure
while the wind rippled the tight skin forming on the cooling
porridge
and sandspray dropped by windgusts depressed it:
to begin, at the beginning of a day, to be a person
and take and hold a shape to last for this one day.....

(afterwards the old lags came along with their favourite
warders, to select
the young prisoners who had caught their eye,
so that these could be assigned to their span)

III
some mornings we lined up for "hospital"
-- it meant mostly getting castor oil --
but what a varied bunch we were!
for all had injuries -- but in such variety
split heads; smashed ankles, arms;
cut feet in bandages, or torn and bloodied legs:
some, under uniform, wore their mass of bruises
but what a bruised and broken motley lot we were!

VIA. Breyten Bretenbach "Taalstry"

"Clear as the conscience of a gun"
- Miroslav Holub

Ons is oud.
Ons taal is 'n grys reserwis van meer dan honderd jaar
met die vingers styf om die snellers --
en wie sal soos ons kan sing
wanneer ons nie meer daar is nie?
Soos in ons lewe sal ons die aarde verwerp
en die wonderwerke van die vlees wat groei
soos woorde spoel en klop --
Julle sal die liggame vir one gedagtes wees
en lewe p, pms sterwe te herdenk
en die wysies uit ons beenbluite te tower ...

Van die struktuur van ones gewete
en iut die skure van ons liefdadigheid
het ons vir julle swart konstruksies laat bout bliksems --
skole, klinieke, poskantore, polisiestasies --
en nou waai die pliume swart rook
met die klop en die spoel van'n hart.

Maar julle het nie mooi verstaan nie.
Die Taal moet julle nog bemeester
Ons sal julle die ABC van voorag voorse,
ons sal julle tou-wys-maak
met die riglyne van ons Christelike Nasional Opvoeding ...

Julle sal leer om gehoorsaam te wees,
gehoorsaam en onderdanig.
En julle sal die Taal leer gebruik,
pmderdanig sal julle die gebruik
want in ons le die monde
med die gif in die klop en die spoel van die hart.

Julle is die sout van die aarde --
waarmee sal ons ons sterwe smaak kan gee
as julle nie daar is nie?
Julle sal die aarde bitter enbrak en glinsterend maak
van die klank van ons lippe ...

Want ons is Christus se laksmanne.
Ons is op die mure om die lokasies
met die geweer in die een hand
en die masjiengeweer in die ander:
ons, sendelinge van die Beskawing.

Ons bring vir julle die grammatika van geweld
en die sinsbout van verwoesting --
uit die tradisie van ons vuurwapens
sal julle die werkwoorde van vergelding ghoor
stotter.

Kyk, ons gee vir julle nuwe nomde pasella --
rooi ore om mee te hoor rooi oe om mee te sien al
polsende, rooi monde
om die geheime van ons vrees te mag spuit:
daar waar iedere loodpuntwoord vlieg
sal'n spraakorgaan oopgebreek word ...

En julle sal die Taal asseblief leer gebruik,
gehoorsaam sal julle dit gebruik, breek ...
want ons le reeds met die doodstoggel
se klop en se spoel
aan die lippe ...

Ons, ons is oud ...

VIB. Breyten Breytenbach "The Struggle for the Taal"

"Clean as the conscience of a gun"
- Miroslav Holub

We ourselves are aged.
Our language is a grey reservist a hundred years old and
more

his fingers stiff around the triggers --
and who will be able to sing as we sang
when we are no longer there?
As we did when alive we will spurn the earth
and the miracles of the flesh which grows
throbbing and flowing like words --
It is you who will serve as bodies for our thoughts
and live to commemorate our death,
you will conjure up tunes from the flutes of our bones ...

From the structure of our conscience
from the stores of our charity
we had black contraptions built for you, you bastards --
schools, clinics, post-offices, police-stations --
and now the plumes blow black smoke
throbbing and flowing like a heart.

But you have not fully understood.
You have yet to master the Taal.
We will make you say the ABC all over again,
we will teach you the ropes
of Christian National Education ...

You will learn to be submissive
submissive and humble.
And you will learn to use the Taal,
with humility you will use it
for it is we who possess the mouths
with the poison in the throb and the flow of the heart.

You are the salt of the earth --
with what will we be able to spice our dying
if you are not there?
you will make the earth glint, bitter and brackish
with the sound of our lips ...

For we are Christ's executioners.
We are on the walls around the townships
gun in one hand
machine-gun in the other:
we, the missionaries of Civilization.

We bring you the grammar of violence
and the syntax of destruction --
from the tradition of our firearms
you will hear the verbs of retribution
stuttering.

Look what we're giving you, free and for nothing -- new
mouths
red ears with which to hear red eyes with which to see
pulsing, red mouths
so that you can spout the secrets of our fear:
where each lead-nosed word flies
a speech organ will be torn open ...

And you will please learn to use the Taal,
with humility use it, abuse it ...
because we are down already, the death-rattle's
throb and flow
on our lips ...

As for us, we are aged ...

VII. Dennis Brutus "In my part of the world"

In my part of the world,
In my part of Africa,
In my part of this continent of ours,
South Africa
(I am from South Africa)
we have a very simple greeting:
we say "Africa".
When we meet
and when we part
we say "Africa".
And when we wish to express our brotherhood
our shared and common purpose
we say "Africa".
And when we wish to show our love
and declare our common will
we say "Africa".

In my part of Africa
we have a very simple greeting:
we say --
"Africa".

VIII. Cosmo Pieterse "Love Exile Land"

I shall not be sad
Though away from you
Who have harboured the love
Moving me -- stage for my passion, my sleepless bed.

It is particularly and first of all you I nestle in
Thought, till the wings of my dream
Seem to have strength to carry me over all oceans, and safe,
Love, arriving with you, at last, to settle down.

In that thought is a moment: we shall come together,
Driven in the going of an instant time as the social world
gathers feathers
And contracts to its free common, that we may flower and fly
further
And become one, and grow on forever.

IX. M. Pascal Gwala "Gumba, Gumba, Gumba"

Been watching this jive

For too long.
That's struggle.
West Street ain't the place
To hang around any more;
Pavid's Building is gone.
Gone is Osmond's Bottle Store.
And West Street is like dry;
The dry of patent leather
When the guests have left.
And the cats have to roll like
Dice into the passageways ....
Seeking a fix
While they keep off the jinx.
That's struggle.

Miasmic haze at 12 noon
Stretching into the wilderness
Of uniformed gables ....
Vast and penetrating
As the Devil's eye.
At night you see another dream
White and monstrous;
Dropping from earth's heaven,
Whitewashing your own Black dream.
That's struggle.
Get up to listen
To Black screams outside;
With deep cries, bitter cries.
That's struggle.

Struggle is when
You have to lower your eyes
And steer time
With your bent voice.
When you drag along --
Mechanically.
Your shoulders refusing;
Refusing like a young bull
Not wanting to dive
Into the dipping tank
Struggle is keying your tune
To harmonise with your inside.

Witness a dachsund bitch shitting
A beautiful Black woman's figure too close by,
Her hand holding the strap;
In a whitelonely suburb.
Tramp the city
Even if you're sleepweary;
'Cos your Black arse
Can't rest on a "Whites Only" seat.
Jerk your talk
Frown in your laughs
Smile when you ain't happy.
That's struggle.

Struggle is being offered choices that fink your smiles.
Choices that dampen your frown.
Struggle is knowing
What's lacking in your desires
'Cos even your desires are made
To be too hard for you to grab.

Seeing how far
You are from the abyss
Far the way your people are.
Searching to find it;
Ain't nobody to cry for you.
When you know what's bugging your mama
You mama coming from the white madam's.
When all the buses
Don't pick you up
In the morning, on your way to work.
'Cos there ain't even room to stand.
Maybe you squeezed all of Soweto.
Umlazi, Kwa-Mashu
Into one stretch of a dream;
Maybe Chatsworth, maybe Bonteheuwel.
Then you chased it & went after it;
It, the IT and ITS.
Perhaps you broke free.
If you have seen:
Seen queues at the off-course tote;
Seen a man's guts -- the man walking still
Seen a man blue-eye his wife;
See a woman being kicked by a cop.

You seen struggle.
If you have heard:
Heard a man bugger a woman, old as his mother;
Heard a child giggle at obscene jokes
Heard a mother weep over a dead son;
Heard a foreman say "boy" to a labouring oupa
Heard a bellowing, drunken voice in an alley.
You hear struggle.

Knowing words don't kill
But a gun does.
That's struggle.
For no more jive
Evening's eight
Ain't never late.
Black is struggle.

X. Sipho Sepamla "Children of the Earth"

Children of the earth
the earth of gods
gods of the lost, the forsaken and the downtroddeen

it is with humility
these words are spoken

the yield of years bears witness of you
you with hands that clawed the ground one night
you with hand that hurled stones at bullets

bullets talk
shit talk that is
bullets split brains
brains with blood that is

you gave us a revised bantu education
of nice-looking double-storeyed buildings
of teachers scrambling for matric certificates

certificates talk
shit talk that is
certificates that make good servants
servants that are servile that is

you gave us ebullient community councillors
with long black flowing gowns
pussyfooting councillors who raise rents for match-boxes

match boxes are a life
the life of being houses that is
shit bricks and asbestos
that suck in colds and disease that is

you gave us high-rising masts for lights
with orange lighting that makes us ghosts
ghosts that inhabit concentration camps

camps talk
of being prisons that is
camps talk
of their dirt, rape and murders

children of the earth
the earth of gods
gods of the lost, the forsaken and the wanderer

you opened the way to Angola
you opened the way to Tanzania
you opened the way to Cuba

they talk of your return in Soweto
they talk of your return in Mamelodi
they talk of your return in Kwa-Mashu

consultations over you in Pretoria
consultations over you in Cape Town
consultations over you in Durban

children of the earth
the earth of gods
gods of the militant

we shall weave your name in song
we shall weave your name in song
we shall weave your name in song
children of the earth

XI. Pitika Ntuli "Under the censor's guillotine"

In my country
Our war begins when we try
to drink the cauldron of sunset
with our bruised eyes
hands tied to our backs
tongues sliced at the root
our words one with the wind
raw material of sounds
we hear echoes before
thoughts are uttered
carve answers before
words strike the eardrum
our poems coming
in waves of whispers

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