

*Wir Künstler! Wir Verhehler der Natürlichkeit! Wir Mond- und Gottsüchtigen! Wir
todtenstillen unermüdlichen Wanderer, auf Höhen, die wir nicht als Höhen sehen, sondern
als unsere Ebenen, als unsere Sicherheiten!*

Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft

*We artists! We ignore what is natural! We are moonstruck and God-struck! We wander,
still as death, unwearied, on heights that we do not see as heights but as plains, as our
safety.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science

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METAPHYSICAL BALM

AND

THE POET AS LEGISLATOR

BY

MICHÈLE BETTY (BTTMIC007)

Creative portfolio and essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2015

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

DECLARATION

I, Michèle Betty (BTTMIC007), declare this work has not previously been submitted in whole or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work or works of other people, has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date:

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METAPHYSICAL BALM

by

MICHÈLE BETTY

Section I

*And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light.*

T. S. Eliot, Burnt Norton

Owl's Birthright

Owl orients to her air cell,
double bends her neck,
tucks beak, neatly,
under right wing,
thrusts head forward
to pierce the inner membrane.

With her egg tooth,
she pecks a thousand times,
turns in an oval egg,
counter-clockwise,
squirms, struggles,
works feverishly,
until with vigorous shove,
she pips through the shell.

Wet and panting
she lies still, strength sapped.

Trembling and afraid,

Owl claws to rise:
thirsting for water,
with a silent scream,
she opens her beak,
to swallow rain.

Owl Alights in the Dell

Owl, cryptic of colour,
alights in the Dell,
nestles in the nook of a holly tree:
one light ring encircling one dark ring,
a hundred fossil rings complete,
perched in its crook,
head clock, clock, clocking,
umber eyes blinking.

Owl peers all the way to the bath,
to the bird-shaped pool,
the Divine image of us,
trip, trip, tripping
along seven sandstone boulders,
wedged in lilted water
drawn from the icy springs
of an ancient aquifer.

A child bends,
drinks greedily from the pool.

Owl thirsts.

Owl is a Witness to Wild Horses

They came at sunrise
the second the orange globe
rose a half moon on the horizon,
tingeing the sky
pale pink and the purple of bruises:
nickering and nuzzling,
nostrils flaring, muscles aquiver,
sweat trickling down sinewed legs:
all shades of white,
all shades of black,
all shades of brown,
moving in stillness
to pass beneath the mottled boughs
of Owl's Saffron Tree:
like the Word,
a pulsing, living expression
of love in unison;
and when they left in quiet,
Owl considered whether
they had ever been,
but their evidence was everywhere
and their scent,
earthy and wholesome,
enveloped her.

The Baptism of Owl

Owl journeys to sprinkle holy water
cupped from a grotto at Lourdes,
travels to India to float diyas
down the River Ganges,
pilgrims to Mecca to drink deeply
from the Well of Zamzam:
with an Inhalation, a single Breath,
she returns in rejoice to her Dell,
reaches in ritual,
with striped legs cast out before her,
for the cool waters of the pond,
flushes the pale ochre
of her disc-shaped face,
twitches her ear tufts,
rinses under beating wings,
stamps her feet in the shallows of salvation,
twirls her head in liberation's delight,
immerses herself, in the icy waters
of her Dell's spirit spring.

A Dove delicately descends:

"Owl, Beloved,

I am well pleased"

A Supernatural Longing

Stirring from a mild slumber,
Owl longs for the olive-scented
breath of the wind.
As the first sign of light
overshadows the Wild Olive,
Owl senses the faithful falling
of an early morning dew
settling in the smooth
creases of her cheeks.
Surpassing all other desires,
Owl inhales the olive-scented
breath of the wind;
a supernatural breeze
stirs through the glade,
one hundred thousand leaves rustling,
reigning over her -
Animus
Pneuma,
Ruh
Ruach –
gripped by God,
Owl inhales
the cool breath of the spirit.

The Discipleship of Owl

Owl had a vision
whilst peering through the dark -
a figure sprung from the fertile fingers
of a brazen Botticelli -
a virgin goddess, towering in full armour,
strength of Zeus, companion of heroes,
yet careful in wisdom,
beckoning with olive branch
from the depths of her golden chariot:
and in the instant Athena
focused her gaze,
Owl was compelled
to rest a cheek at her shoulder,
to hover with healing wings,
knowing intuitively, that she,
like those Favoured Fishermen,
would abandon
everything she knew,
everyone she loved,
every comfort born of the nest,
to bask in the brilliance
of her vision's radiant light.

A Transverberation of the Heart

Owl embarks on a detailed study
of the human body,
beginning in the cranial cavity
housing the skull and brain,
she traces a subtle ripple
through the cervical region
delicately enclosing the spinal cord,
navigating south toward the thoracic basin,
she journeys past the clavicles,
to bronchi, esophagus, lymph nodes-
on to nerves,
twining into the pleural chamber,
surrounding each lung,
to focus her gaze
on the pericardial plane;
heart of four chambers
enclosed in a triple layered,
protective sac:
site of the transverberation
of Teresa of Ávila,
El Castillo Interior
a crystal castle housing
seven interior courts,
emanating light,
recipient of consolations,
recurrent visions of angels,
a heart levitating in ecstasy,
pierced by the golden lance of a seraph,
left sweetly inflamed,
by a mystical, divine love.

The Foresight of Owl

Owl hoots three times
perched in the shadows
of an oversized moon:
a dusk duet resounds
before with jerking head
she stoops, swallows whole,
the spoils of a silent hunt.

Section II

The river is within us, the sea is all about us.

T. S. Eliot, The Dry Salvages

Owl encounters Crow

For forty days and forty nights
a storm raged through the Dell.
Owl, weak and feeble, has not eaten.
As she swoops to the gloomy grey
of her Saffron Tree,
a sickly shadow passes overhead -
a reek of the ghost of Faustus.
Owl, transfixed,
peers through sullen light to see
Crow hunkering over Kill:
a glut of blood,
a mangle of bones,
he picks out the eye
swallows and stares.
Black Eye meets White Eye.
As Crow's howl fills the glade,
lightning claps
bearing rain in torrents:
Owl shudders,
and with eyes firmly closed,
flees in trepidation.

Owl Confronts a Crisis

Owl wrestles with a vindictive Crow
on a barren ledge of mountain
that eeks into a vortex,
a thousand meters above a turbulent sea.

She casts Crow off
with a fierceness that belies her body
but in her eagerness to flee,
wedges the underside
of her claw in a crevice,
a pathway for cascading winter waterfalls.

For days she fights the clasp
of the stubborn rock,
but when rain pelts relentlessly,
she senses dereliction.

As days turn to nights,
water funnels through her eyes,
matts her feathers,
hail hammers her belly
and bruises her flank,
she begins to wonder
in her surreal state:

Can Owls Drown?

In fury and frustration,
Owl's wings outstretch instinctively,
pulse to a quickened beat -
she relaxes her grip on the rock
and with a utopian exhale,
writhes to twist herself free.

Owl's Angel

No evil shall befall you, nor shall affliction come near your tent, for to His angels God has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways. Psalm 91 (10 -12)

Owl made a choice
to travel to a new place.
She circled, airborne,
checked for Crow,
branched in the direction
of the flat mountain
and swooped silently
to the security
of a familiar Yellowwood.
Braving new ground,
she circled up and over the tree-line,
reached the mist of the mountain,
looped to penetrate and
experience new clarity,
but, looking down through
puffs of White cloud,
she was startled to
see Crow laughing
with menace from the entrance
of a darkened cave,
and falling, she crashed through the
branches and needles of
a hundred stagnant pines,
stalling in the remnants
of the blister and bone
of a discarded animal carcass:
it was then,
a mystical creature,
hair coils of fiery bronze,
sword raised in right arm,
scooped Owl lightly up,
and transported her
with tender fervour
to the safety of her nest.

The Energy of Anatomy

Owl, bird with a four-chambered heart,
crimson in colour,
thumping 500 beats a minute,
aspect of her eyes
forward-facing and wisened,
with three-dimensional
binocular vision in monochrome,
a visible third eye,
nictitating for prolonged protection:
but, curiously,
the medulla, wedged in the brain
for triangular Hearing,
surprises most:
95 000 neurons -
three times as many as Crow.

Owl and Crow Converse

Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God. Isaiah 40 (3)

There are Light Workers
declares Owl cryptically to Crow.
Light Workers,
Workers living in the Light,
self-reliant and headstrong,
a legion of old souls, auras of indigo,
floating across the orbit of your temples
like a cooling compress
infused with the fragrance of
geranium and jasmine.
Crow cocks his head dubiously to the side,
to numb the cauldron blazing in his head.

There is a New Brain
sighs Owl patiently to Crow.
A New Brain,
a Brain that is New,
independent, yet linked telepathically
one in a Trinity of brains,
millions of neurons per square inch,
transferring energy,
fed by spiritual mysteries -
every hair on your head is counted -
the mark of it, is Light.
Crow blinks confused,
shakes out his feathers,
to calm the shudders
coursing through his flesh.

There are Earth Angels
muses Owl curiously to Crow.
Earth Angels,
Angels on the Earth
living among the spirit myths of Origen,

mystic and messianic,
with truth in their perception,
whose pilgrim purpose is Peace,
filling the God-shaped hole
in every discontented Heart
with a legacy of miracles,
a catalyst to heal the hurt.
Crow hunkers down to
hide his gnawing hunger,
swallows and blinks at Owl.
Stupefied.

Section III

And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not

T. S. Eliot, East Coker

Caesura

for Jo

Owl paused in a lull
at a windowpane of eight quadrants,
balanced on the sill,
peered into dust-flecked light,
lofting onto brick-brown parquet floors.
She observed the details
of a child's simple sketch,
oversized head and stick legs,
with a swirl of brilliant yellow and green
lovingly framed in black ebony.
A pale-grey Weimaraner,
with blue eyes staring,
startles as it sits statuesque
in an oversized wingback chair.
On a nest of side tables,
an array of pills:
insomnia, anxiety, painkillers,
nausea, morphine.

Bits of lego are strewn about.

Owl sits,
transfixed and immobile,
at the windowpane
of eight quadrants -
lets her wing feathers
splay across the moats of her eyes.

Owl Awakes to an Ill-Omen

A darkening in Owl's plumage
was the first omen
of the onset of her ailment,
followed by the fleshy,
grape-like clusters,
collecting at her wing joints,
the base of her beak,
then weight loss, coupled with
an insidious weakness -
a deep set lethargy.

To curb the ill-fated spread,
Owl sought out a curative,
an overgrown grove
of her favourite trees,
Cunonia Capensis,
Butterspoon Trees,
rooted in fertile earth
alongside a spirited stream.

She wrapped her talons
around the ash coloured bark,
shuffled to gaze beyond stipules
of bronze butterspoons
at the panorama before her.
Inhaling the rarified mountain air,
(in the manner of Hans Castorp
ensconced at the Berghof),
time stood still,
her anxiety dissipated:
liberated and consoled,
she waited in seclusion
for deliverance from demons,
enlightenment for her soul.

Transitions

for Marina

Can you live on another plane,
incarnate,
soul travel to a different dimension,
transmuted?

Can you edge out your physical pain,
in a metaphysical world,
dare you message us through a medium,
shaken?

Are you beset by
ghouls and gargoyles,
beasts baring themselves
out of a fevered ferment?

Or, can you transition,
effortlessly, through
a celestial light
towards a haven, heaven bound?

And, can you do all this lying wrapped,
in your percale cotton cocoon,
my hand lying heavy
on the nape of your fragile neck?

La Bête Noire

In the palpable midnight gloom,
Owl shifts from one foot
to another
shift, shift,
shift, shift,
eyes blink open, unbidden,
with a start,
an incurable vision
from the past, looms,
shift, shift
shift, shift:
balancing precariously
Owls' talons gouge
the forked branches
of her Corkwood -
a crimson resin oozes
over mottled bark;
as the musky scent of myrrh
overwhelms her,
Owl laments,
"Is there no Balm
in Gilead?"

A Peculiar Alienation

Owl pricks her ears
to attune to the scattered sounds
of a multitude of crickets clicking,
the late afternoon cooing call of doves,
the trickle of water
over the sandstones of her Dell,
the scurrying of ants
on the forest floor below;
in this background symphony,
she opens wide
the amphitheater of her mind:
the beating of her bird heart quickens,
blood rushes to her pale face,
a discordant dizziness overcomes her
as she lifts her wings in an arc,
to contemplate, how it is,
that amongst all this profusion
she perches, without consolation,
so devastatingly alone.

Spiritual Reflections from a Fish Tank

In a sprawling pet shop
an array of tropical fish
float in rectangular tanks
stacked high and wide,
fluorescent globes
distribute a melancholy glow,
seeping through crystalline water,
to reveal wide-open eyes
glaring from the shadows
cast by coral and willowy water plants.

On closer inspection,
to the shop owner's ambivalence,
several specimens appear
in the throes of a curious death dance –
an alien twist and loop by the Parrot Fish,
a neurotic, side-up, surface floating by the Surgeon Fish,
an unnatural gasping by the Angelfish and, finally,
the paleontological Mudskipper,
leaping with a repeated and doleful
head-banging against invisible glass.

A Narrow Place

Owl deliberates
as her down feathers diminish
and thicker, juvenile ones,
drab in colour for camouflage,
metamorphosise in contours,
across her rump and scapula.

Elevated on a terrace,
among tufts of luxuriant ferns,
she studies the shape
of the crevice where
she used to wedge herself in stealth -
a secret arched alcove,
between the stratified sandstone opening
of two towering boulders.

As drops of vapour precipitate,
a melancholy call floats
along the delicate footpath
winding its way
into the fertile river basin,
and descends through
the fissure of the valley:
a palliative resignation -
the nook, now a narrow place,
inaccessible, no longer a comfort
for the exercise of old rituals.

Seeking Sahasrana

for Fanini

Today
I wandered
the width
of my garden,
choosing only
white Selma Bock:
enlarged crowns
of whiter than white
agapanthus,
with lilac-lavender centers,
one thousand,
thousand petals,
stem
after evergreen stem,
until
not one remained,
to place
by your bedside,
a day
too late.

Section IV

*Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude*

T. S. Eliot, Burnt Norton

Untergehen

Owl balanced tirelessly, in solitude,
amongst the shallow fluted branches
of a handsome Corkwood Tree,
nestled in the creamy-green
dense flower heads,
picked at seeds overflowing
from ovoid fruits.

She visualized the hunt:
a scan to scour and possess her prey,
a pull-back of her head.
Like the sun,
an over-rich star
dripping down to the horizon,
she swoops dangerously
to descend, silently weightless,
to the Underworld:
with a forward thrust of feet
talons spread wide,
she overcomes her prey
with a magnanimous yet sudden,
snap, of her beak.

A Priest's Journey

He walked upright,
a graceful gait,
clothed in black,
with a white collar,
a silver crucifix
pinned neatly to his lapel.
Like a *Ficus Natalensis*,
he was deep rooted,
boughs outstretched,
a dense evergreen shelter for
transient birds and bats.

It was only the beating,
like an excessive pruning out of season,
with no tender daub of salve applied,
that caused him to shudder unexpectedly.
Like a rootball shocked,
he lost his now wilted leaves.

Three men had pierced
his right side with a knife,
their fists drew scarlet welts
from under both eyes,
they held him down,
tied him up,
locked him away
and left him for dead.

And cloaked for hours
in that shroud of inky dark,
he scribbled letters,
on wafer-thin pages
torn from his Bible,
first to the ones he loved
and then to God.

A Russian Fatalism

Owl stood transfixed
in the remnants of her nest,
shuddered at the sticks
and bits of bone
splayed about amongst
ruffled feathers and
an owlet's severed claw.
She hunkered down,
neck sinking into breast,
slowed her breath,
took no food
and like a Russian Soldier
Lying Down in the Snow,
lay motionless in a perilous grave,
to blink occasionally at Crow
hopping annoyingly
on one leg
to and fro,
to and fro,
before her steadfast gaze,
which clung to the memories
that flashed before her eyes:
lightening illuminating
a deafening darkness.

Owl's Eyes

At the angle of Owl's eye,
beneath the lower lid
rests a membrane
extending horizontally
across the span of the eyeball,
separating lid from socket,
a third eye,
nictitating during night dreams
for heightened moisture
and increased visibility,
a microscopic and tenuous
three layered epithelium
of translucent connective tissue:
a liminal zone
at the threshold.

An Indivisible Continuum

*So we stood, alive in the river of light,
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light*

Ted Hughes, from "That Morning"

Owl watched, mesmerized
by the metallic blue-green
of the humpback salmon,
moving stealthily to spawn
in the natal rivers of their birth,
pressed in their oblong hundreds,
simultaneously in shadow and iridescent light,
shimmering upstream against the current,
passing fingerlings migrating, tail first, downstream,
to estuaries feeding the open ocean,
depositing eggs in the gravel beds
of quiet pools at the base of falls and rapids,
then, calmly willing the water to flood their gills,
they alter to a silvery pale-grey,
transferring nutrients
rich in nitrogen, sulphur,
carbon and phosphorous,
to adjacent riparian woodlands,
moving with the uncanny precision
of a mystical magnetoception,
toward the parabola of an imminent death
that draws them, tail first, downstream.

Section V

*Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers. There is no earth smell
Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time
But not in time's covenant*

T. S. Eliot, Little Gidding

Owl invokes a Paraclete

for Christopher Clohessey

Holy Spirit

Spirit of Truth

Lightful Spirit

Holy Breath

Almighty Breath

Giver of Life

Lord of Grace

Helper

Comforter

Counselor

Supporter

Advocate

Paracletus

Parakletos

Paraclete

Who can you be?

What will you look like?

Grace infused

with virtue,

light to distill

dark corners,

tongues of fire

to empty a tomb.

Entbindung

In the tranquil stillness
of a womb,
at the moment of conception
gametes combine to form
a gravitationally centred
unitary cell,
an embryo mantled
in warm water:
after a momentary lull,
a rapid division of cells
until on the fifteenth day
a primal midline uprises
to furrow a path
from what will be
coccyx and sacrum
enfolding on itself,
to the embryonic heart,
generating from the epiblast,
three germ layers shaping
bone and muscle, organs
and liquid crystalline connective tissue,
to form vertebrae and limb buds,
a neural tube, the brain, spinal cord,
nervous system, neural crest;
a bilateral symmetry
enveloped in two-bodiness,
birthed from a primitive
primordial streak –
an entranced tracing
by the Finger of God.

Inscapes

The iris of his almond eyes

alights on the daisies.

He hunches down,

checks his strap is

securely over his neck.

As slender fingers grip the zoom,

he raises the lens, slowly,

to an expectant face.

His tongue wets his lips,

words trip over his tongue

Click, click -

Each white dot

flecked on a blood-orange petal,

where moments before

appeared as a pinprick,

now an elongated, tubular heart:

Scotus's *haecceitas*,

Hopkins' inscape

and I stand back

in awe of Him.

Observations From the Tide Waters

Owl surveys the vista
from her immutable perch
in an overgrown Waterpear,
rooted in a squelchy sandbank
alongside undulating woodland
in the Great Zambezi basin.

The fishing boat's nose
decelerates through
a carpet cloud of rising mist,
parting like the Red Sea for Moses,
travels across metamorphic beds
fringed with igneous rock.

As the boat trawls through lapping waters,
a bright orange lure
is attached to strengthened line,
the ratchet is loosed and Owl's ears prick
with the plop of a cast into a current
streaming as constant as the call of the Creator.

A hippo bellows from the reeds below,
the line goes taut, the rod arcs a semi-circle,
a metre high leap of a tiger fish twisting in the air,
jerks off the three-pronged hook,
blue-orange tailfins blazing, silver-tipped scales
flashing the morning sun's reflection and the fish's fine escape.

Owl yearns to abandon herself
to a tide so tumultuous.

Wrap your head around your heart

whispered Owl,
to her owlets
swooping down
with Providence
from a secret perch,
fluting feathers
shifting sound energy,
silencing flight,
omniscient, as she hovers,
mantling her prey,
to feed them,
nesting in their theocracy,
for the tenth time that day:
twisting twirls of earthworm,
wriggling woes of
a mouse pounced:
Listen, murmured Owl
to her owlets -
wrap your head
around your heart.

Duende

no formar más que la médulla de forma

Frederico García Lorca

Owl felt the blood surge
from the knobbly soles
of her feathered feet
rushing up her sinewed legs,
ascending in a rhythmic tempo,
to balloon in flexible arteries,
passing through hollow
cavities in her neck,
pooling in minute reservoirs
at the base of her head.

As she swivels her neck 270 degrees

"Olé! Vive Dios!" exalts Owl,

listening to the stamping
of her feet, flamboyantly roused
by the curved sensation
of this unearthly, flame-coloured,
swell of blood.

Beyond Understanding

*Und sie staunen dem krönlichen Haupt, das für immer,
schweigend, der Menschen Gesicht
auf die Waage der Sterne gelegt.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Zehnte Elegie, Duino Elegies

Owl peers through
a circular portal,
a chronology
two thousand years
before the birth of Christ,
to an exuberant
mesoamerican civilization
inhabiting the area from
Mexico through Belize,
Guatemala to Honduras,
a hieroglyphic language
depicted in stone *stelae*,
arithmetics and calendrics,
astronomical systems
encompassing labyrinths
to appreciate equinoxes,
lunar phases and seasons,
ceremonial architecture
with monumental palaces
stepped pyramids and temples
trading cacao, salt and seashells,
jade and obsidian.

Owl peers again through
the circular portal
to laboratory scientists,
epigraphers and archeologists
manipulating instruments
for newton activation
and multispectral imaging,

dating a mysterious ceramic cylinder
painted with metaphors by the Maya:
a rain god's abundant paradise of
flowering orchards,
mystical sea creatures,
shadow, breath, blood and bone,
spook-like creatures,
violent stars.

Ancient Giants

Coelacanth,
fish of rare lineage,
transitional species,
living fossil,
fish of eight fins,
a heart of variant shape,
bottle-green fish creation
crafted from clay,
extinct then
miraculously rediscovered:
like the Fisher of Men,
of David's fine line,
enigma both God and man,
reaching from the realms
of a church archaic,
twelve devoted disciples,
a heart of variant shape,
in a crooked cross immortalized,
now bidding from
amongst the pages
of a Bible plucked
from antiquity,
feeding five thousand
on a hackneyed hill
from a single
woven basket
filled with
fish and loaves.

Ancestral Karma

The Cedar tree,
abundant at altitude,
piniforous in nature,
stretched her boughs wide
thick as ramparts
a comfort for nesting
squirrels and birds,
her wood yielding *cedrium*,
eliciting a soothing fragrance:
dwelling place of Gilgamesh's gods,
prow and stern of Phoenician vessels,
wainscotted roof and floor
of King Solomon's Temple.

Owl rests in the shadows
of the Cedar tree,
wraps herself in its warmth,
to survey the complexities of life,
surprising in their sharp agonies,
memento, homo, quia pulvis es,
dust unto dust,
a vita peracta -
redolent truths,
rediscovered amongst
the scent and sturdiness
of the cedarwood.

In-seeing an Ocean

Owl imagined for a day
that she was an ocean,
mile upon mile of weighted water,
refracted light and soundless shadows,
with enigmatic sea creatures suspended
like a foetus in the womb:
giant whales spurting
plumes of iridescent water,
multi-coloured luminous shoals,
salt-laden frothy foam,
scalloped seashells
and a gravitational force
sparking warm currents
and the soothing pressure of tides,
emanating from the god-like
face of the moon.

Owl's Alchemy

I *Nigredo*

In the shadow of
sommnambulant gardens
sloping down to Lake Zurich,
at the heart of the home of
the Wizard of Künsnacht,
Owl collects chemicals
for an arcane experiment:
prima materia,
lead and tin
copper and iron,
tumbles them together
to form a Black Mass
to be calcinated, putrefied,
washed to purify and
then carefully distilled.

II *Albedo*

Concealed among
acres of woodlands,
reading in reverie
The Secret of the Golden Flower,
Owl rescues her retort stand,
regulates the blue-rimmed flame
emanating from the burner:
"hieros gamos", she whispers –
a synthesis of opposites -
and across the span
of the lead-like mass,
Owl achieves the sheen
of a vast Whitening.

III Rubredo

Following a circuitous route,
Owl comes to rest in the forests
at the Villa Eranos,
takes in a breath,
unlocks the retort stand
to reveal a crystallised stone:
gold but not the common gold,
radiating the red
of a cosmic healing,
Lapis Philosophorum:
The Philosopher's Stone.

Ode to Zarathustra

“Zarathustra”, intuits Owl,
an orator preaching parables
amidst the pathways
of dense trees and
flighty families of birds.

“Zarathustra”, wills Owl,
offering alms to salvage
the forest from its malaise –
her thoughts flashing
an ellipsis, birthed in
the recesses of her
instinctive animal brain.

“Zarathustra”, incarnates Owl,
in a breath borne
of the Dionysian -
a vision of eternal return
from an uncreative crisis
to the mythmaking power
of a Carpenter offering
a communion of bread and wine,
until forced, on bended knee,
to hoist a human-sized
wooden cross.

To Circumnavigate an Archipelago

From an anomalous volcanic hotspot,
molten magma upwells,
to form thermal mantle plumes,
tectonic plates in motion
create continental fragments
with vast underwater islands,
seamounts and circular atolls
accompanying shallows,
banks and ancient reefs,
home to sea turtles and starfish,
bottlenose dolphins and speckled whale shark.

Owl circumnavigates,
soaring against gravity,
feather and hollow bone,
in rising lukewarm thermals,
weight, lift, drag, thrust -
from island to separate island
from azure to blue-black sea
each port of call an unique narrative,
providing a new perspective
on the archipelago
that first appeared
in an exotic, vivid vision.

Section VI

*After the kingfisher's wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.*

T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

The Wingspan of My Owl

The day I huffed
up the lopsided steps,
sawn from the bark rings
of an old Oak Tree,
to the top of the sloping hillside
behind my house,
mind as dense with skepticism
as the Doubting Disciple,
was the day I saw that Owl.

That day,
I could not see
for the looking down,
for the muffled mist
playing tricks with my eyes -
yet, peering through
the dense tree-line,
it appeared,
hovering effortlessly,
in the forward motion of a sunbird:
the largest Owl I had ever seen,
talons gripping the underside
of the massive branches
of a gnarled Oak,
sharpened beak scraping
at sweetened shards of bark,
wingspan reaching
from fingertip to fingertip
of outstretched human arms,
the flapping more a thudding,
as if to say:
How can you doubt?
How do you dare?

Acceptance

Across the expanse
of a twilight sky,
a Sickle Moon
and the Evening Star,
Owl discerns mist
collecting resplendent
in humid air,
weightless as the down
feathers of her youth,
dispersing enigmatically
to settle in solitude,
refracted and reflected,
in puffs and pockets,
on each and every
shadow touched.

As I raised my eyes heavenward

I.

In the year I turned forty
an ache birthed itself
in my hip.

Slowly, it gravitated inward
from my soft inner thigh,
creeping snakelike,
to grasp for my groin,
twisting selfishly
around my hipbone,
waiting for protest.

I paid it no attention,
deferred to it demurely,
but its grip on me only tightened.

I felt the ache travel,
down my tibia,
into my cruciate,
sidle along my calf muscle,
with a stab in the lower back,
to arrest resistance.

I dabbled with many devices:
tablets round as a moon eclipsed,
vials red and green,
yoga more often
or sometimes less,
undignified dressing
and undressing for
medical muses of all sorts.
But the devil held me fast.

II.

So, I visited a church
to voice my disapproval
to the Three Persons in one God.
The priest relayed a tale
of a Mexican child,
scalded but then healed
as she nestled unseen
at the altar of the Divine.
Diligently, I prayed.
But the devil held me fast.

III.

Months later,
I sojourned the streets of London,
searching for a cross,
a haven for an hour.
Amongst scaffolding secluded,
I came upon the church,
russet-red stained glass windows
depicting the passion
along the length and breadth
of its ancient walls,
hundreds of tea-light candles burning.

An old man appeared earnestly before me,
grey, curling eyebrows,
lips gently lifted,
eyes softly sparkling.
“I cannot”, I explained wryly,
“I am not trained”.
I reached to touch the tassels on his cloak.
He insisted,
waved away my veiled insecurity.
“Have courage”.

He insisted.

So I stood on the altar,
with my accompanying ache,
gravitating from my soft inner thigh,
to grasp for my groin,
twisting around my hipbone,
travelling down my tibia,
into my cruciate,
sidling along my calf muscle,
with a stab in my lower back
and I offered the chalice
as he raised the host,
fingers trembling,
“This is the Blood of Christ”.

“You must wipe”,
whispered a raven-haired woman -
“the chalice”,
and so I did,
“the Blood of Christ”
wipe,
“the Blood of Christ”
wipe,
and I whispered to the Divine
for intercession,
I argued with Him for healing.

IV.

But when I sat serenely
on the wooden bench,
my feet earthed
on the reddened pile carpet,
duties complete,
I felt the familiar pain
splinter in my back,

and water collected in the corners
of my eyes - from the pain
you understand.
My hands were shaking.

V.

In the year I turned forty,
I resolved to walk in London,
early, before my loved ones woke.
I slipped out,
breathed in the misty air,
checked my map for directions,
from Regent's Park into the
Queen Mary Gardens.
I passed the Royal Institute of Architects,
turned left into Park Square,
and left to the Outer Circle,
where I was arrested
by the rows of delphiniums,
begonias, foxgloves,
snowdrops, snapdragons.

I crossed the York Bridge
and ambled towards the Inner Circle,
anointed by a sight that could soften
even the deepest of aches -
twelve thousand roses,
travelling up trellises,
scrambling along loamy soil,
every colour reflected,
buds aflame
hearts heaven bound,
some as white as my linen folding cloth,
others as golden as my chalice,
still others as blood-red
as the wine I had offered.

As I raised my eyes heavenward
and listened to my feet crunch the gravel,
I knew, startled and with a clarity
reserved for the righteous,
that my deep ache had left me,
whilst walking.

ENDNOTES

- Page 13 **Lourdes** is a small market town situated in the foothills of the Pyrenees, famous for the Marian apparitions said to have occurred in 1858 to Bernadette Soubirous. It has become a major place of Roman Catholic pilgrimage. The spring water from the grotto is believed by many to possess miraculous healing properties (“Lourdes”, n.d.).
- Page 13 **The River Ganges** is sacred to Hindus along every fragment of its course. They bathe in its waters, paying homage to their ancestors and gods by cupping water in their hands, lifting it and letting it fall back into the river. They offer flowers and rose petals, which are floated on the river in shallow, clay dishes filled with oils and lit with wicks called diyas (“Ganges River”, 2015).
- Page 13 **The Well of Zamzam** is a well situated within the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. According to Islamic belief, it is a miraculously generated source of water, sent from God, which began thousands of years ago when Ibrahim’s infant son, Ishmael, was thirsty and kept crying for water. Millions of pilgrims visit the well each year to drink its water (“Mecca”, n.d.).
- Page 15 ***Animus, Pneuma, Ruh and Ruach*** translate varyingly as “spirit” or “soul”. *Pneuma* is Greek, *ruh* is Arabic, *ruach* is Hebrew and *animus* is Latin.
- Page 16 **St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)** was a prominent Spanish mystic and Roman Catholic nun canonised by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. Transverberation is a reference to the mystical piercing of St Teresa’s heart by an angel, written about by St Teresa in her autobiography completed in 1565. It was the inspiration for one of Bernini’s most famous works, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa. Among Saint Teresa’s many books is *El Castillo Interior* (the Interior Castle), a guide for spiritual development through prayer. The book was inspired by her visions of the soul as a crystal globe in the shape of a castle containing seven mansions, which she interpreted as the journey of faith through seven stages, ending with union with God (“St Teresa of Ávila”, n.d.).

Page 23 **The New Brain:** Robert Bly, in his book *Leaping Poetry*, devotes a chapter to the subject of the three brains. He summarises the conclusions made by American neurologist Paul MacLean, who theorises that the human being does not have one brain but three, each to some extent independent of the other. First, the reptilian brain, responsible for basic human instinct, physical survival, food and security; second, the mammalian brain, responsible for different functions such as a sense of community and love (including sexual love); and lastly, the new brain, a neo-cortex with complex brain tissue probably created for problems more complicated than those it is currently being used for. Bly refers to Charles Fair who writes in *The Dying Self* that the food for the new brain is “wild spiritual ideas”. The existence of the Greek mystery religions and the Essene cult, of which Jesus Christ was a follower, could, accordingly, be seen as attempts to feed the new brain. If man wishes to live more in the new brain than in the mammalian or reptilian brain, it is possible to transfer energy from the reptilian brain, through the mammalian brain and to the new brain. Whichever brain receives the most energy will determine the tone of that person’s personality. According to Bly, ecology workers, artists, poets, musicians and many people in the younger generation are trying to reverse the energy flow in the brain from the reptilian and mammalian brains to the new brain. (Bly, 1975: 76–84).

Page 23 **Origen** of Alexandria was a third-century theologian who used Platonic-type myths in his teachings. He is famous for his philosophical treatise *On First Principles* that sets out his doctrine on the pre-existence and fall of souls. According to Origen’s myth on the spirit, God created a number of spirits in the heavenly realm, dwelling in close proximity to Him, with the intention that they should explore the divine mysteries. However, some spirits grew weary of this intense contemplation and turned away from God. Moving away from God’s divinity, they became clothed in bodies, initially ethereal but later of a more solid state. The purity of the body with which a soul is enveloped depends on the moral development and perfection of the soul to which it is joined. When a soul achieves salvation, it ceases being a soul, returns to a state of pure understanding and is redeemed (Moore, n.d.).

Page 24 **God-shaped hole** is a modern paraphrase of a concept that the famous philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) wrote about in his *Pensées*:

What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself (Pascal, 1958: 113).

Page 26 **Caesura**: Merriam Webster provides the following definition of Caesura:

- 1: in modern prosody: a usually rhetorical break in the flow of sound in the middle of a line of verse
- 2: Greek & Latin prosody: a break in the flow of sound in a verse caused by the ending of a word within a foot
- 3: a break, interruption
- 4: a pause marking a rhythmic point of division in a melody (“caesura”, 2015).

Page 27 **Hans Castorp** is a reference to the fictional protagonist in Thomas Mann’s novel of 1924, *The Magic Mountain*, who undertakes a journey to visit his tubercular cousin at a sanatorium, the Berghoff, situated high in the Swiss Alps in Davos. Castorp remains ensconced at the Berghoff for the next seven years of his life.

Page 29 **La Bête Noire**: Carl Gustav Jung writes of the French term *bête noire* in his text *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Complexes, he says, are a result of conflict. The characteristics of conflict – namely shock, upheaval, mental agony and inner strife – are peculiar to complexes. They have been called *bêtes noire* by the French, while we refer to them as “skeletons in the closet”. They are vulnerable points, which we do not like to go back to or remember but which frequently come back to our mind unbidden and unwelcome. They always contain memories, wishes, fears, duties, needs or

views with which we have never come to terms and for this reason they constantly interfere with our conscious life in a disturbing and harmful way (Jung, 2001: 81).

Page 29 **Is there no balm in Gilead?** The Book of Jeremiah portrays a nation in crisis and introduces the reader to an extraordinary leader on whom the Lord placed the burden of prophetic office. Jeremiah was born about 650 B.C. to a priestly family from a small village near Jerusalem. While still young, he was called to his task in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign, who instituted many reforms. The prophet Jeremiah supported the reforms of the pious king. However, after the death of King Josiah, idolatry returned and Jeremiah opposed this with all his strength. He was arrested, imprisoned and subjected to public disgrace. The final words of this poem – "Is there no balm in Gilead?" – is a quote from Jeremiah 8:22. In a metaphorical plea for healing, Jeremiah laments: "Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician there?" (The New American Bible, Saint Joseph Edition, 1992: 892–893).

Page 33 **Sahasrana** is the seventh primary chakra according to the Hindu tradition. It is symbolised by a thousand-petalled lotus located at the crown of the head, or slightly above, and is represented by the colour white. It is concerned with issues such as inner wisdom and death of the physical body. It symbolises detachment from illusion – an essential element in obtaining higher consciousness or truth – and embodies a state that can bring rebirth and transformation to the divine (Myss, 1996: 68, 69).

Page 35 **Untergehen:** There is no English equivalent for *untergehen*. Literally, it can be translated from German as "going under", but it can also refer to a setting sun, drowning or perishing. Friedrich Nietzsche's choice of words for Zarathustra's descent in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is *unterhegen* (Nietzsche, 2003, 39). In Nietzschean philosophy, the man who is able to overcome himself becomes truly human (Nietzsche, 1966: 283).

Page 37 **Like a Russian Soldier Lying Down in the Snow:** In *Ecco Homo*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes that man's fighting instinct sometimes wears out. In cases like these, man has one great remedy: Russian fatalism. This is the fatalism without revolt exemplified by a Russian soldier, who when finding a campaign too strenuous finally lies down in the snow: "no longer to accept

anything at all, no longer to take anything, no longer to absorb anything – to cease reacting altogether. This fatalism is not always merely the courage to die; it can also preserve life under the most perilous conditions by reducing the metabolism, slowing it down, as a kind of will to hibernate.” (Nietzsche, 1966, 230).

Page 38 **A liminal zone at the threshold:** In her article “Don’t worry be happy (or the use of art in tricky places)”, Rebecca Salter describes the use of design concepts from Japanese gardens, where changes in texture or scale denote points of departure, transition or arrival. She discusses how Japanese architecture stresses the importance of blurring the internal and external worlds, how it embraces the ambiguous nature of what she refers to as “the liminal zone of the threshold” (Salter, 2014: 53).

Page 41 **Paraclete** comes from the Greek word *parakletos* meaning one who consoles or comforts, advocate or intercessor. In Latin, *paracletus* means advocate or helper. Also known as Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, Paraclete is, in Christian belief, the third person of the Trinity, a distinct divine person equal in substance to the Father and the Son, and not subordinate to them (Sollier, 1911).

Page 42 **Entbindung** refers to an untying (in childbirth) in German.

Page 42 **The Finger of God:** Well-known embryologist Jaap van der Wal calls this still-unexplained primitive streak, the Finger of God. In his essay “The embryo in us: A phenomenological search for soul and consciousness in the prenatal body”, he argues that a human is a consciousness having a body, not (as is commonly accepted) a body producing consciousness. Put another way, “we do not have a soul, we are soul” (Van der Wal, 2013: 153).

Page 43 Microphotography is dedicated to the photography of small objects, producing images that range from life-size to enlargements of up to 20 times the size the original. It is often used to capture the aspect of a thing that makes it unique.

Page 43 **Scotus’s haecceitas:** Gerard Manley Hopkins was influenced by medieval theologian Duns Scotus, who developed the notion of *haecceitas*: everything created has its own distinctive character, which makes it unique and shows God’s purpose in creating it. This is its “self” or “thisness”. Hopkins

developed a theory of inscape, instress or self based on his reading of Scotus. In the ideal moments of inscape, various elements of a scene or thing come together and God can be seen there. Each thing has its own distinguishing characteristics with a natural urge towards its proper function. The revelation of God occurs in the revelation of the “self” of a thing. This is the ultimate beauty, a moment of oneness or fusion when all the separate qualities come together to form what it essentially is, and God is seen there (Hunter, 1966: 20, 21).

Page 46 **Duende** is difficult to define in English. It is a Spanish word that connotes a heightened state of emotion, coupled with authenticity or “having soul”.

Page 46 **no formar más que la médula de forma:** Translated from the Spanish as “not form, but the marrow of form”, from “*Juego y teoría del duende*” (theory and play of the *duende*) by Federico García Lorca, a lecture given by the poet in Buenos Aires in 1933 (Lorca, 1933).

Page 47 Rainer Maria Rilke had the Sphinx in mind when he wrote these words, translated by Stephen Mitchell (Mitchell, 1989: 209):

And they look in wonder at the regal head that has silently
lifted the human face
to the scale of the stars, forever.

Page 50 **Memento, homo, quia pulvis es:** Translated from the Latin as “remember man that thou art dust and to dust thou shall return”. In Catholic theology, on Ash Wednesday (traditionally 40 days before Easter), the priest blesses the forehead of participants with the ash of palm trees and chants the words: *memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*. This symbolises both joy (at life and life to come) and sadness (at death) during the period of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, participants are reminded of their mortality. The words are from a translation of Genesis 3:19 when Adam and Eve were made subject to the corruption of death with the words of God ringing in their ears: “for thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return”.

Page 50 **Gilgamesh’s gods:** “The Epic of Gilgamesh” is a poem from ancient Mesopotamia dating from 2100 BC and often regarded as the first great work of literature. It tells the story of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, and Enkidu,

a wild man created from the soil by the gods to teach the king (who had become proud and arrogant) life lessons. After an initial fight, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become close friends and together journey to the Cedar Forest to defeat Humbaba, its monstrous guardian. However, Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh, in a deep state of grief, recognises his own mortality and begins to question the meaning of life. Casting away his old pride he sets out on a quest to find the meaning of life and the value of human accomplishments in the face of extinction (Mark, 2013).

Page 50 **Phoenician vessels:** The Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic civilisation situated on the coastline of today's Lebanon and Syria. They had an enterprising maritime culture and were well-known navigators. They were famous for their ship-building abilities and advanced maritime trade, as well as for the spread of their alphabets, from which most modern phonetic alphabets are derived. It is said that they used cedar wood from Lebanon to construct their ships ("Phoenicians: Ancient Ships...", n.d.).

Page 50 **King Solomon's Temple:** There is no direct archaeological evidence for the existence of King Solomon's Temple. However, according to the Hebrew Bible, King Solomon's Temple was the Holy Temple constructed under Solomon said to have housed the Ark of the Covenant. It was supposedly constructed in 832 B.C. In 1 Kings 6:16, reference is made to the floor and walls being constructed of cedar wood (The New American Bible, Saint Joseph Edition, 1992: 329).

Page 50 ***a vita peracta*:** Carl Gustav Jung in his autobiography titled *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* makes reference to the fact that he believed he had two distinct personalities. The first was a changing, versatile personality capable of learning from life's situations, while the second was "grown-up, remote from the world of men but close to nature, the earth, the sun, the moon, the weather, all living creatures, and above all close to dreams, and to whatever God worked directly in him". This personality possessed a total vision of life: "born, living, dead, everything in one" – *a vita peracta* (Jung, 1995: 107).

Page 51 **In-seeing an Ocean** is a play on the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In a letter addressed to Magda von Hattingberg dated 17 February 1914, he uses the example of a dog to describe what it is to "in-see". By this he means

not just seeing through the dog but, as he describes it, situating yourself in the dog's centre – that place where God, when He sat down for a moment after creating the dog, would have acknowledged that nothing in it was lacking and that it could not have been better made. Rilke urges poets to write from that place of God-like in-seeing (Mitchell, 1989: 313).

Page 52 **Wizard of Küsnacht:** Carl Gustav Jung lived in a small town in Switzerland by the name of Küsnacht and is often referred to as the wizard of Küsnacht.

Page 52 **Nigredo, Albedo, Rubredo:** According to O'Conner, Jung began his alchemical studies in earnest from 1928. However, it was not until seven years later that he presented his findings to the public at the Villa Eranos in Ascona, Switzerland and a further seven years that those lectures were elaborated into one of Jung's key works, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1985: 107). Briefly, Jung believed that the various stages and images generated by alchemy were reflections of an inner transformation process (which he termed individuation) expressing itself in a chemical language. The stone, or *lapis*, that the alchemists attempted to liberate from its vessel was, Jung believed, a liberation of the self. The philosopher's stone was generally believed to be produced by alchemists in three chemical stages: first, *nigredo*, a darkness or blackening; second, *albedo*, a whiteness or whitening; and third, *rubredo*, a reddening or colouring of gold (O'Conner, 1985: 114).

Page 54 **Zarathustra** is a reference to the famous philosophical novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, written by Friedrich Nietzsche, which chronicles the fictitious speeches and travels of Zarathustra. This poem seeks to draw on the parallels between the Zarathustrian myth and the Christian myth.

Page 55 **Archipelago:** In his text on Lyotard titled *The Lyotard Dictionary*, Stuart Sim makes reference to the fact that the archipelago was an image favoured by Lyotard as one suggesting both togetherness and separateness. Lyotard believed that narratives can often be seen in this way – each has its own identity but is reachable from another, like a chain of islands. Sailing from island to island allows you to discover how each part can alter one's perception of the archipelago as an entity. However, one can never arrive at a definitive understanding because there is always a process of change and re-creation (Sim, 2011: 6).

THE POET AS LEGISLATOR

BY

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1 ABSTRACT

This essay was born of a desire to understand the relationship between poetry and politics in a meaningful and current way. The twentieth century has seen atrocities that have taken place on an unprecedented scale: times of historical and social extremity, states of exile, censorship, military occupation, political persecution, torture, warfare, assassination, apartheid and, more recently, forms of violent terrorism. This essay will consider the function of poetry in a world overcome and consumed by violence.

The essay will begin with a consideration of the political function of the ideas expressed in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (hereinafter *A Defence*). Shelley's notion of the promise of art and what it de facto delivers, and his ideas on the significance of poems in the context of politics will be examined. The essay will then consider the views of the Russian Formalists on how to establish the "literariness" of a text and the ability of a text to "defamiliarise", as well as the devices that can be used by a poet to achieve literariness and defamiliarisation. It will touch on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his concepts of folk humour and grotesque realism in a text. Carolyn Forché's idea of poetry as a witness of a lived experience, as enunciated in her text *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, will be discussed. Thereafter, the essay will consider Viljoen and Van der Merwe's notions of liminality in literature, as expounded in their text *Beyond the Threshold*, and their explanation of how language can act as a transformative vehicle.

In order to illustrate these concepts practically, the essay will analyse two South African poetry collections, namely: Nathan Trantraal's *Chokers en Survivors* and Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. The analyses will reveal what distinguishes mere resistance poetry and political diatribe from poetry that is lasting and effective.

2 INTRODUCTION

This study examines the interrelated nature of politics and poetry – what Carolyn Forché (1993: 30) eloquently describes as “the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination”. The study will begin by considering the famous comments of Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in *A Defence* that poets “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Shelley, 1845: 109). It will then reflect on the views of the Russian Formalists on the nature and function of literary texts: specifically the literariness of texts, the devices used by poets within texts and defamiliarisation. The unique and valuable work of Mikhail Bakhtin will also be discussed. The essay will move on to examine Carolyn Forché’s notion of poetry as the witness of a lived experience and that, in order to achieve this, a poet must resort to the use of language suitable to the times. It will also consider Viljoen and Van der Merwe’s conception of the notion of liminality and the hybridisation of language as expounded in their text *Beyond the Threshold*.

To ground the essay in a uniquely South African context, the poetry collections of two South African poets will be discussed. In the first instance, consideration will be given to Nathan Trantraal’s *Chokers en Survivors*, published in 2013 and written in Cape vernacular (hereinafter “Kaaps”). It will be argued that, notwithstanding the emotive and excessively expressive nature of many of the poems, the collection avoids the label of what Douglas Livingstone termed the “political pamphleteer - a short-lived and grubby calling” (Livingstone, 1976: 62). Given the social and political context of South Africa in 2013, it will be argued that Trantraal’s collection offers the reader an opportunity to see things in an unfamiliar way. The poems achieve what the Formalists conceived of: they defamiliarise. In this way, although political and social in nature, they can still be regarded as poems in the true sense of the word. Through the use of, inter alia, various postmodern techniques (specifically the use of language), Trantraal elevates his collection beyond mere political rhetoric.

Oswald Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* was first published in 1971, in the height of political unrest and turmoil in South Africa. The collection was published in English and used vivid imagery to evoke the horror of the apartheid system. It will be argued that this collection also offers more than just political outcry. It provides a mechanism for the reader to see past the gruesome experiences, to live through the social upheaval and – for a modern generation no longer living under apartheid – to bear witness to the

events of the past. The notion of liminality in a divided society will be discussed to convey how Mtshali, through his collection, contributed towards the formation of a communal identity to which society could relate at the time.

In considering the nature of the violent times in which we have lived, and continue to live, this essay seeks to understand how the selected collections, despite being overtly political in nature, have left or will leave a lasting mark on humanity and the factors that combine to differentiate the lasting poems from the frivolous or short-lived. This aspect of poetry and politics will be explored in an attempt to uncover the mysterious mechanisms that separate a poem of enduring significance from one that falls within the ambit of a mere resistance poem disseminating protest by what Ulliyatt describes as a “political diatribe” or “pamphleteering” (Ulliyatt, 1977: 61).

3 PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*

3.1 A Defence

Shelley's *A Defence* was not published until 1840, when it appeared in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* by Percy Bysshe Shelley (two volumes) edited by his widow. The essay was, however, written in Pisa in February and March 1821, as a reply to an essay by Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock entitled “The Four Ages of Poetry”. Peacock's attacks on poetry and his exaltation of science and politics at the expense of imaginative literature led to his assumption that poetry had run its course in modern civilisation (Needham, 1931: xxxiv). Shelley's *A Defence* is accordingly not only his own personal apologia but an answer to the several charges against poetry that are contained in Peacock's essay.

Shelley begins his reply with a classification of two essential mental faculties, reason and imagination, with reason being a sub-set of imagination. Shelley describes reason as mathematic, associative and logical, while imagination is creative, synthetic and spiritual. He insists that imagination is transformative – a human power capable of refashioning the world. Its highest expression is poetry (Shelley, 1845: 67).

In an anthropological tour, Shelley then traces the history of imagination's role in creating human society and culture, pausing in each epoch to note how art was the spark for social transformation and revolution. He stops when he reaches his own time and place – England in 1821– and considers the premise that utility, or the rule of reason, has created inequality, poverty and corruption.

According to Shelley, there have been only three poets who have delivered, as he consistently terms, “epic truth” (1845: 95). Homer and Dante were the first two and Milton was the third. He argues that poetry becomes eternal as a result of its transformative power. This power is expressed differently in different epochs. It was Milton's epic poetry that reinvented a dynamic calculation appropriate for his era and the modern period that would follow

him. For Shelley, the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius, the thing that allowed his poems to work according to an epic truth calculated to excite the sympathy of succeeding generations, is his intentional "bold neglect of a direct moral purpose" (Shelley, 1845: 94–95). Milton does not simply reverse conventional expectations but alleges that there is indeed no superiority between God and devil. Shelley identifies this formal neglect of a moral purpose with a contention for the revolutionary properties of art and argues that Milton's work is inflected with the early nineteenth-century language of revolution.

Shelley's essay seeks to prove that poetry is the greatest moral teacher and in this respect is superior to philosophy and history. However, poetry must not be overly moralistic, but should also be "delightful" – its essence being artistic rather than moralistic. Shelley argues that the poet is possessed of inspired vision and thus able to present a picture of the ideal world and an ideal truth, which men are inspired to render actual when they see it embodied in certain forms of poetry (Needham, 1931: xxxx). Shelley rewrote *A Defence* after a reading of Plato's *Ion*, and his treatment of the theme, the relations between poetry and morality, bears distinctly the mark of platonic idealism. Morality for Shelley is not a narrow code of social rules, but a harmony of the soul, reflecting the harmony and order of the universe. Such harmony can be viewed as beauty, goodness or truth. Its expression in art is beauty; its expression in conduct is goodness. The expression of beauty is, for Shelley, closely aligned with sympathy or self-extension or, what we refer to as, love (Needham, 1931: xxxv, xxxvi).

3.2 The critical and political function of *A Defence*

In his article entitled "Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley's Defence of Adorno", Robert Kaufman attempts to ascertain what, if any, critical and political function Shelley's *A Defence* can serve.

Kaufman (1986: 708) writes that Shelley's model for the poet-revolutionary (and the touchstone of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*) is the poet Milton. Shelley's *A Defence* includes a formal account (linked to Milton) of aesthetic experience, which he seeks to describe in a revolutionary language. The self-conscious usage of this vocabulary of revolution allows Shelley to put forward the idea that aesthetic experience has political value because of its

potential to generate critical thought. Kaufman frames this contention as a corrective to the many interpretations that limit *A Defence* to its assertions that poetry and art are merely inspirational, prophetic and almost willy-nilly transformative. Kaufman (1986: 709) argues, convincingly, that Shelley conceives the aesthetic experience as a formal process that produces – through the mind’s engagement with the dynamics, textures and resistances of art – critical thinking itself as a form of truth. Such truth, for Shelley, does not inevitably translate into a progressive politics, but is essential to it. This reading contests post-structuralist judgments that Shelley abandoned politics for an elitist or escapist aesthetics. In one of the most famous passages of *A Defence*, Shelley writes:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own ... Poetry enlarges the circumference of imagination, by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight ... (Shelley, 1845: 79).

Awakening is metaphoric and spiritual. What Shelley portrays as a going out of the self, a grasping of previously un-apprehended relations between things and people, is what, since Russian Formalism, has been called defamiliarisation. Shelley more or less calls it that himself. He asserts in *A Defence* that poetry:

awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand un-apprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar (Shelley, 1845: 78).

All this is deemed revolutionary. As Kaufman (1996: 723) writes, poetry’s work of defamiliarisation – its contribution to imaginative empowerment and the going out of self – leads to social renovation, the “awakening” of the politically “entranced” and the “struggle for civil and religious liberty”. Shelley maintains that the degree to which art generates or accompanies social change remains mysterious. It follows, from this general refusal of certainty about cause and effect, that the particular content of poetry cannot assure a particular ethical or political response on the part of the reader. Since morality is strengthened by the formal exercise of the imagination, content itself is deemed irrelevant. For Shelley, the tension between the promise of art and

what it delivers in practice resolves itself in a sustained paradox: art is revolutionary, yet in itself non-partisan. Its revolutionary character stems from its potential to stimulate critical thought, without which change is inconceivable (Kaufman, 1996: 724). Amid debates over the “aesthetics and politics” question, Kaufman writes that there is no royal road between defamiliarisation and political agency. Although art, criticism and aesthetics do not themselves forge a link between perception and action, the stimulus to perception and critical thought that they do afford may be valued for being a prerequisite of effective action (Kaufman, 1996: 725).

3.3 Shelley’s commitment to political poetry

Andrew Franta (2001: 765), in his article “Shelley and the Politics of Indirection”, writes that recent work on Shelley has focused on the relationship between poetry and politics in an attempt to explain poetry’s role in effecting political change. Franta argues (2001: 766) that this approach misses the point of Shelley’s commitment to political poetry, which has less to do with its intervention in contemporary politics than its redefinition of the formal conditions of political change. Critics have continued to ask why a writer committed to many of the tenets of radical political reform chose poetry as his vehicle. If your aim is to change the world, why choose a form of expression with a severely limited and, in many circumstances, radically inappropriate audience? Franta (2001: 767) argues that for Shelley, poetry is neither a way to intervene in political conflicts nor a means by which to transcend them. Instead, Shelley imagines that poetry recommends itself for political analysis by virtue of its peculiar conditions of appearance to the world. As Shelley sees it, poetry is a process defined by its transmission from one generation to the next. This long-term view of the process of writing, which extends the time frame of poetry to include not only its composition and reception by an immediate audience but also its relations to future readers, makes a claim for poetic form itself and the privilege of a future perspective on the present. As Franta (2001: 768) writes, if poetry’s longevity – the sense in which poems outlive their authors and first readers – might initially look like a way of conveying a political message to future readers, it is better understood as a way of imaginatively occupying a future unbound by the terms of present conflicts. Poetry’s peculiar power is that it lies in wait, as it were, until the materialisation of its proper audience. This deferral reflects the expectation

that the poem will find its audience in the future and is also an effort to conscript the future for political purposes. In Shelley's poems, such as *The Mask of Anarchy* (written following the Peterloo massacre in 1819), the fundamental political significance lies in not making a case for a particular course of action but recognising that the event will have a history, and predicting the future significance of the occasion (Franta, 2001: 774).

Shelley insists that politics is ephemeral, while poetry lasts. Rather than charting a course of action for the future, his poems provide an account of what happened that positions itself on a poetic, as opposed to journalistic, tradition and thus imagines for itself a future readership (Franta, 2001: 780). Shelley's aim is not to incite political action but to create a holding pattern capable of preserving the poem's address for an audience that is in a position to recognise the account it provides (Franta, 2001: 782). Therefore, rather than predicting the future for the present, Shelley seeks to imagine a future that will see the present for what it was.

Taking a long-term view of the poetic process, including the contribution poetry makes to politics, is also an integral part of *A Defence* and is reflected in Shelley's sense that poets are the "mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" (Shelley, 1845: 109). For Shelley, the poetry cannot effect the political change. Therefore he addresses a future audience that may see the injustice for what it is (Franta, 2001: 785). In this sense, Shelley's poetry does not conceive of poetry as a tool for effecting change so much as an instrument for registering future change.

Accepting this, it is necessary to then consider aspects of the poetry that is produced in today's age of violence (referred to in the abstract on page 73 of this essay). Shelley declared in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: "Didactic poetry is my abhorrence" (Webb, 1977: 32). The essay will seek to determine the factors that would characterise poetry of lasting significance compared to the merely didactic poetry that was Shelley's abhorrence. A consideration of the views of the Russian Formalists, who formulated their own influential theory of the literariness of literature, is useful at this juncture.

4.1 A brief history

Although Russian Formalism's roots go back to the 1880s, it existed as an identifiable movement only in the years preceding the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the decade succeeding it. It was an influential school of literary criticism originating in Russia and included the works of a number of highly influential Soviet literary historians and philologists: Viktor Šklovskij, Boris Eichenbaum, Jurij Tynyanov and Roman Jakobson. These scholars, who shared theoretical interests, revolutionised literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. They exerted a major influence on writers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and on structuralism as a whole (Bennet, 1979: 18).

According to the author Victor Erlich in his iconic text, *Russian Formalism*, the Formalists were not solely concerned with the purpose of art. They sought to steer clear of philosophical pre-conceptions as to the nature of artistic creation (Erlich, 1955: 145). Formalist aesthetics was descriptive rather than metaphysical and highlighted two crucial and interrelated tenets: first, it emphasised the literary work and its constituent parts, and those features of the literary work that distinguish it from other human activities and should consequently constitute the object of inquiry of literary theory; and second, it asserted that "literary facts" have to be prioritised over the metaphysical commitments of literary criticism, whether philosophical, aesthetic or psychological. Formalists, therefore, placed an emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language, to the exclusion of traditional psychological and cultural-historical approaches (Erlich, 1955: 145).

4.2 The driving force behind Formalism

According to Bennet (1979: 19-20), the Formalists had several major concerns:

- 1) They wished to establish the study of literature on a scientific footing, as an autonomous science. This entailed an examination of the question of

literariness – in other words, the problem of specifying formal and linguistic properties that distinguish literature and poetry from other forms of discourse and particularly from prosaic or ordinary language. They held that the question of literature’s specificity could only be resolved with reference to the formal properties of literary texts. It was unnecessary to take into account the historical forces operative in the construction of such texts (an assumption that brought them into conflict with developing schools of Marxist criticism in Russia). Their aim was to isolate and define those things specific to literature or poetic language and these would become the “devices” that make up the “artfulness” of literature.

- 2) The Formalists argued that literary texts “make strange”; they dislocate our perceptions of the real world so as to make the text the object of a renewed attentiveness. This ability to defamiliarise the forms through which we customarily perceive the world is what, they argued, uniquely distinguishes literature from other forms of discourse.
- 3) Finally, the Formalists were concerned with the formal mechanisms whereby literary works tended to reveal or make strange the systems of coherence imposed on reality by the codes and conventions of other, usually earlier, literary forms.

The Formalists argued that literature should be regarded as a practice that, through a variety of formal devices, enacts a transformation of existing categories of thought and expression. By subverting dominant patterns of thought imposed on reality by categories of ordinary language, literature is thus said to make such forms strange and, in so doing, to weaken their grip on the ways in which we perceive the world. In this way, literature creates a vision of the object. It does not, as science does, organise the world conceptually, but rather disorganises the forms through which the world is customarily perceived (Bennet, 1979: 24).

The driving force behind Formalism was a desire to systematise literary scholarship as a distinct and integrated field. The Formalists believed literature needed to delimit its area and define, unequivocally, its subject of inquiry. They began from the premise that the literary scholar should address him or herself to the actual works of imaginative literature rather than to the

external circumstances in which literature is produced. In order to disengage literature from other disciplines, for example, psychology, sociology or social history, they wished to narrow the definition further. Therefore the study of literary scholarship becomes not the study of literature in its totality, but rather a study of literariness – that which makes of a given work a work of literature (Erlich, 1955: 156).

4.3 Priem Ostrannenija

A consideration of the nature of literariness became the central concern of the Formalists and comprises the bulk of Formalist theory. The Formalists were impervious to all theories locating the differentiae in the poet rather than the poem. They would brush aside ideas of intuition, imagination, or genius. The locus of the peculiarity of literature was to be found not in the author or reader's psyche but in the work itself. The difference, for the Formalists, between literature and non-literature was to be sought not in the subject matter (that is, the reality dealt with by the author) but rather in the mode of presentation. In this they came into conflict with the time-honoured notion, supported by Aristotle through Coleridge, C. D. Lewis and Herbert Read, that proclaims the use of images as the outstanding characteristic of imaginative literature (Erlich, 1955: 147). The Formalists subjected this doctrine to searching criticism. They believed that the visual images evoked by poetry are vague and subjective because they hinge, to a large degree, on the individual reader's sensibility. Therefore, the material of poetry was, for the Formalists, neither images nor emotions, but words – where the poetic diction becomes vital. It is not the mere presence of imagery that differentiates poetry, but the use to which the image is put. Formalists protested against equating poetic language with imagery. If, in prose, a metaphor aims to bring the subject closer to the audience, in poetry, it serves as a means of intensifying the intended aesthetic effect. Rather than translating the unfamiliar into the terms of the familiar, the poetic image makes strange the habitual by presenting it in a novel light and by placing it in an unexpected context. This theory of making strange the depicted object switched the emphasis from the poetic use of the image to the function of poetic art. The image was seen as merely one of the devices at the disposal of the poet. There was thus a semantic shift (Erlich, 1955: 148, 150).

The Formalists used the image of people living at the seashore to illustrate this concept. Such people grow so accustomed to the sound of the waves that they don't hear them anymore. In the same way, we no longer hear the words we utter. It is this habit that the artist is called upon to counteract. By tearing the object out of its habitual context and bringing together disparate notions, the poet forces us to have a heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture. The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to perception, giving greater density to the world. This device of making it strange is referred to in Russian as *priem ostranneniya* (Erlich, 1955: 150–151). Using Tolstoy as an example, the Formalists showed how Tolstoy refused to recognise familiar objects and described them as if they were seen for the first time. It was Tolstoy's challenge to the cliché, the elimination of "big words" and the replacement thereof with basic naïve vocabulary that made strange his work. Making it strange did not necessarily entail a substitution of the elaborate for the simple. It could mean the reverse – the use of the profane or earthly term instead of the learned or genteel. It was not the direction of the semantic shift that mattered but the fact that a shift occurred. It was this quality of divergence that underscored aesthetic perception (Erlich, 1955: 151).

To the Formalists, the fundamental issue was not the reader's attitude toward reality but the poet's attitude toward language. It is in the way the poet used his or her medium that Formalist theoreticians saw the signs of literariness. Thus, the task of locating the differentia of imaginative literature became a matter of delimiting poetic speech from other modes of discourse. The distinctive feature of poetry lies in the fact that a word is perceived as a word and not merely a proxy for an outburst of emotion. Words – their arrangement, their meaning and their outward and inward form – acquired weight and value of their own. The medium and the "perceptibility of the modes of expression" were the crucial formulations that sharply juxtaposed the language of imaginative literature with other types of discourse (Erlich, 1950: 156). All the techniques at the poet's disposal – rhythm, euphony and, last but not least, images – were seen as converging upon the word in order to throw into relief its complete texture, its density. In poetry, the Formalists insisted, the word is more than a verbal shadow of the object; it is an object in its own right. Therefore the aim of poetry is to make perceptible the texture of the word in all its aspects. The inward form of the word, that is, its semantic value, is no less essential to the aesthetic effect than the sheer sound. Poetry was recognised as

a complex transaction involving semantic, morphological and phonetic levels of language (Erlich, 1955: 158).

Russian Formalism considered the traditional dichotomy of form versus content – the “how” and “what” of literature. They took issue with the naïve and uncritical notion of form as mere clothing for the poet’s ideas. In imaginative literature, content – emotional or cognitive – appears only through the medium and cannot be conceived of apart from artistic embodiment. Love, sorrow and tragic inner strife do not exist in poetry per se but only in their concrete form. The Formalists were aware of the pitfalls of traditional terminology. In discussing the structure of the literary fact and the mechanism of the literary process, they tended to substitute for static terms such as form and content, a dynamic pair of notions, materials and device (in Russian, *priem*) (Erlich, 1955: 160). To them, these terms had methodological advantages. The materials represented the raw nature of literature, which only became eligible for participation in the literary work of art through the agency of the device or, more exactly, a set of devices peculiar to imaginative literature (Erlich, 1955: 159–161).

They embarked on a detailed analysis of the nature of the materials. Among the Formalists, there was disagreement about whether the materials comprised the subject matter of the work or rather the language. However, it seemed unanimous that the materials meant the residue of the poetic communication. Ideas and emotions embedded in a work, as well as events depicted in it, are treated as building materials for the job of artistic construction – the same as words or word combinations. Words became the very materials of the work. Literature is made up of words and is governed by the laws that govern language. So the materials of literature are equated with its verbal texture. The poet, it is argued, works in language in the same way in which the musician deals with tone and the painter colour. This view is congruent with the Formalist insistence on the self-contained character of the literary work (Erlich, 1955: 162). The conception of the creative process as a tension between ordinary speech and artistic devices, which shape or deform it, corroborated the Formalist tenet that literature is essentially a linguistic or semiotic phenomenon – an unfolding of the verbal material or a system of signs. The poet’s job is defined as manipulation of language rather than a representation of reality. If the above notion of materials was testimony to the

linguistic orientation of Formalism, the correlative term device was still more crucial. *Device* was the watchword of Russian Formalism. “art as a *device*”, “the *device* of making it strange” (*priem ostrannenija*), “a *device* laid bare” (*obnazhenie priema*), “the literary work is a sum-total of the *devices* employed in it”: in all these crucial formulations “*priem*” appears as a key term – the basic unit of poetic form and the agency of literariness (Erlich, 1955: 162). The very choice of the term was significant. For Formalists, literary technology seemed a much firmer ground than psychology. For the Russian Formalists, if imaginative literature was a system of signs, organised so as to be perceptible, it was necessary to establish for each type of literature the organising principle and the set of conventions superimposed on the materials (Erlich, 1955: 163). A Formalist, when faced with a new literary object, would not start by inquiring into the psychic drives or social pressures that shaped the work, but into the aesthetic norms that inhered in the given type of literature and imposed themselves on the author, irrespective of his or her social allegiances or artistic temperament.

In the Soviet period under Stalin, any art that used complex techniques and forms seen to be accessible only to the elite rather than simplified for “the people” was seen to be reactionary. For this reason, the Formalists were accused of being politically reactionary and the movement’s leaders suffered political persecution from the 1920s, when Stalin came to power. This by and large put an end to their inquiries (Erlich, 1955: 163).

The *device* of making strange, as referred to by the Formalists, has been modernised and written about in many different forms since Formalism’s demise. In 2011, Harold Bloom, in his *The Anatomy of Influence*, devotes an entire chapter to what he terms “sublime strangeness”. According to Bloom, a sublime poem “transports and elevates, allowing the author’s ‘nobility’ of mind to enlarge its reader as well” (2011: 16). As he mentions, this aspect of the sublime is touched on by Freud in his concept of the “uncanny”, which returns from repression “something familiar and old-established in the mind” (2011: 18). According to Bloom, the concept of strangeness is the mark of sublime literature. He refers to it as the “estrangement of the homelike” and asserts that it is this that renders the relation between sublimity and influence “palpable” (2011: 19). As he puts it: “The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of consciousness

from our own, different, yet not so remote that we cannot partly share it” (Bloom, 2011: 20).

4.4 **Beyond Formalism: The work of Mikhail Bakhtin**

The Formalists’ approach had radical potential but also limitations that curtailed it. Tony Bennet regards the project of historical poetics proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Pavel Medvedev (1892-1938) in the late 1920s as an attempt to realise this potential. Bakhtin and Medvedev reworked the concept of literariness. The concern for them was not with literature per se but rather with whether literary works have an autonomous ideological role entirely their own (Bennet, 1979: 81, 83).

Certain of the issues they raised are illustrated in Bakhtin’s work *Rabelais and his World*, which was written in 1940 but not published in Russia until 1965. It is ostensibly a study of the role of folk humour in Rabelais’ work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and an attempt to account for the historical formation of European belles-lettres as a novel, distinctive form of writing predicated on a new set of social, political and ideological relationships. Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and his World*, (1965: 207-208) proposes that in the classical medieval period two separate ideological spheres existed. First, the official medieval ideology: a world of official seriousness embodied in sacred texts and religious rituals; dominated by a view of existence in which God figured as the centre of the world; generally intolerant with an overarching tone of solemnity; and characterised by feelings of atonement, suffering, oppression, intimidation, fear, religious awe and humility. Second, the world of folk humour: an unofficial world of popular culture embodied in popular rituals and festivals, especially carnivals, where official representation of the world is turned upside down. The world of folk humour was, therefore, a world apart from official ideology and a ritualised “discrowning” of it. This made available not so much a renewal or making strange of ideology but an alternative “carnival” view of the world: a reversal of official ideology (Bennet, 1979: 84). Bakhtin argues that this medieval ideology encompassing parody and gaiety, laughter and jests existed parallel to the official ideology. It was expressed in feasts and carnivals and was founded on principles of laughter and the bodily lower stratum. Bakhtin sees the power of laughter as a liberating force challenging the grip of religious dogma and in this way opening the path for a more open-minded consciousness (1965: 208-209). This ideology is reflected in Bakhtin’s words:

“This laughing truth expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power” (1965: 210).

Bakhtin argues that texts such as Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* were significant because they illustrated this degrading of power, not only through the use of laughter, but also by utilising the principle of “grotesque realism” (1965: 205). According to this principle, bodily imagery served as a means of inverting the official social, moral and political order. It served both to define and limit medieval ideology by replacing the concept of the ascent of the soul into heaven with that of the development of mankind, symbolised by bodily imagery. As an example, Bakhtin considers Rabelais’ treatment of bells, which illustrated the means by which themes from the carnival were used to subvert and belittle the official ideology of Christian thought (Bennet, 1979: 89). Within the context of official religious ideology bells functioned to symbolise spiritual values. They were located in the belfries of churches and belonged to the world of the above. Within the world of the carnival, cowbells were tied to horses’ halters and accompanied feasts and dancing. Bells were thus brought down from their elevated position to take part in the world of below – a world of excess. By wrenching church bells from the first context and placing them firmly in the context of the carnival, Rabelais effected a limiting of official ideology (Bennet, 1979: 86–89). Bakhtin notes that one essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation. However, degradation means one simultaneously brings forth something new and better or, as he states: “Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive negative aspect, but also a regenerating one ... It is always conceiving” (Bakhtin, 1965: 206).

To conclude, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais used a set of devices culled from the world of folk humour to work on the categories of the dominant ideology of medieval society so as to make them appear strange. Bakhtin views Rabelais’ work as exemplifying a new form of writing. This form was the product of a new, historically produced set of social and cultural relationships, which established a connection between two cultural spheres that had previously been kept separate (Bennet, 1979: 90–92). The work of Bakhtin is useful in analysing Trantraal’s collection *Chokers en Survivors*. This essay will argue that some of the devices employed by Trantraal, namely his use of humour coupled

with grotesque realism, work on the dominant ideology so as to make it strange.

5 THE POETRY OF WITNESS

Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.

– Bertolt Brecht, “To sleep I lay down among murderers”

5.1 Poetry of witness

The poetry collections selected for consideration are Nathan Trantraal’s *Chokers en Survivors* and Oswald Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*. Carolyn Forché, in her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, writes that in trying to come to terms with the question of poetry and politics she began by collecting works of poets like Paul Celan, Anna Akhmatova, Federico García Lorca and others. In doing so, she realised that she was in fact accumulating what she refers to as “the poetry of witness” – poems, which bear the “trace of extremity within them” and as such, evidence of the horrors that occurred (1993: 30). However, in order for poetry to be the witness of lived experience, it often has to resort to a language more suitable to the times. In many of the works that she collected, Forché found that the violence of the language, wilful assault on decorum and frequent use of slang attested to the violence of the age. Extremity, writes Forché, demands new forms or alters older modes of poetic thought (1993: 42).

5.2 The use of language in poetry of witness

This notion of resorting to a language more suitable to the time is not altogether new. In *Peculiar Language. Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce*, Derek Attridge provides the reader with an assessment of the use of language in poetry. Attridge (1988: 46-49) notes that historically there seemed to be a common insistence that poets utilise a special linguistic register and encompassed in this insistence is the notion that, for poetry, the use of vulgar or low language was inappropriate. However, during the Romantic period, subtle changes to this approach began to develop: the artist’s task became not to gild nature but to remove the layer of gilt that had accumulated over the centuries and to present it in a more simple form. True

art became nature as manifested in a human being uncorrupted by civilisation, unimpressed by rules, unfettered by the constraints of society and class.

Attridge cites Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* as a watershed in the use of language in Romantic poetry (1988: 49). In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (hereinafter "The Preface"), Wordsworth enunciates that the poet's method is no longer to observe and emulate rules enshrined in the great works of the past but to utter spontaneously "the language that bursts forth in states of deeply felt emotion, recollected or imagined" (Attridge, 1988: 50). Attridge embarks on a detailed reading of "The Preface" where Wordsworth addresses the appropriate language of poetry or, as he terms, "the real language of men" (Wordsworth, 1800: 21). Wordsworth seeks, according to Attridge, to invent a new language – a form of language that is not the product of custom and social change, not subject to abuse or decay, not self-divided or ambiguous (1988: 56). Wordsworth locates this language in "incidents and situations from common life" in "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society", who "convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions" (Wordsworth, 1800: 4). To Wordsworth, poetry is seen as the perfect expression of feeling. Accordingly, it is important that the passions expressed are "natural" and, second, that the language that expresses them is natural. This language, according to Wordsworth, can be found in human beings untainted by the complexities, ambiguities and arbitrariness of human social, political and cultural formations. Simplicity, perfection, non-contingency and permanence are conditions that Wordsworth finds in the rural community that he describes in "The Preface". He makes an appeal to a "real" language more authentic than that found in written texts (Attridge, 1988: 57-59). Notwithstanding the above, Wordsworth notes that successful poetic creation lies not only in imitating the right kind of language but on the poet producing language that is truly poetic. Therefore the poet must speak a language that is real yet simultaneously different, in other words, one should think in terms of what the poet needs to do to ordinary language to make it poetic. Attridge goes on to point out that one obvious difficulty in advancing a theory of poetry based on natural language is indisputably that of form. Natural language patently does not fall into regular rhythmic patterns or rhyme, or group itself into stanzas (Attridge, 1988: 65). The reformulation by Wordsworth and other Romantic writers has been potent in the history of literature and literary theory and has resulted in a

displacement of questions of form by questions of content. Indeed, recent trends in literary theory suggest a revival of anti-formalism (Attridge, 1988: 70). A second objection to Wordsworth's formulation of poetry as transposition of natural language, was put forward by Coleridge: namely, that rural speech cannot provide pleasure to a reader if merely transcribed because of the absence of poetic language. Attridge seeks to further refine the formulations of Wordsworth on this topic by suggesting the introduction of a special activity on the part of the poet that would illuminate the crucial difference between the language of poetry and natural language. Thus, a subtle focus of the gaze on the difference between ordinary and poetic language is what will differentiate low language from poetic language (Attridge, 1988: 71). Attridge convincingly concludes that the attempt to renegotiate the relationship between nature and art circles back in the end to the old distinction: art is grounded in nature but its existence as art depends on its difference in the hands of a minority (the poet, for example) who possess the leisure to cultivate it (1988: 89).

In an article appearing in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* in 2012, titled "Language and Politics in the Philosophy of Adam Small: Some Personal Reflections", Michael Cloete points out that Adam Small had been writing with a linguistic turn, in terms of which Kaaps as "the language of 'ordinary', 'simple' so-called 'coloured people' is presented as a worthy conduit of human reason in the pursuit of dialogue and justice in apartheid South Africa" (Cloete, 2012: 115). Cloete makes note of Adam Small's contention that at stages in South African history where conflict occurs, one cannot give up hope of dialogue. Rather, one must try to find another form of communication in order to get one's message across (Cloete, 2012: 116). As Cloete points out, Small's concern has always been the historical possibility of "authentic dialogue". If one adopts this view, dialogue is inseparable from notions of justice and indeed becomes the normative framework for the pursuit of justice (Cloete, 2012: 118). According to Small, "we must strive to meet one another in dialogue, without the masks" (Small, 1971, quoted by Cloete, 2012: 118). More specifically, we cannot dismiss those who speak a language different from our own on the grounds that their peculiar use of language testifies to "some innate human defect, deeply coded into their genetic structural make-up" (Cloete, 2012: 125). Cloete concludes that Small's philosophy on dialogue represents a brave and commendable adaptation of the tradition of humanism to the historical conditions of

apartheid South Africa, and his sensitivity to the question of language and the use of Kaaps is a pre-condition to reaffirming the worth and dignity of human beings today (2012: 130).

5.3 Language and liminality

The use of alternative languages as a means of harnessing the transformative power of liminal zones is a topic contemplated by Viljoen and Van der Merwe in their work titled *Beyond the Threshold*, where they refer to this as a poetics of hybridity (2007: 5). Viljoen and Van der Merwe compare hybridity in literature to the notion of a hybrid in biology. In biology, a hybrid is a new species created from cross breeding two species. As biological metaphor, hybridity is open to development and elaboration. Different ratios are possible: grafting, transplantation, crossing, fertilisation or inoculation. Hybridity can, therefore, be seen as a type of “inter-textuality” (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, 2007: 5). Texts are accordingly “transplanted” into different contexts and new branches are grafted onto older rootstocks. These vibrant new elements can develop in new and surprising directions (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, 2007: 6). It will be argued that both collections reviewed in this essay utilise a hybrid language to create a new and surprising view of the world.

In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin presents his innovative and dynamic perception of language, within which he views language as an essentially dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1981: 74-80). As Morris reflects, the two most fundamental aspects of language present in many of Bakhtin’s writings on the subject focus on, first, the active creative capacity of language and, second, the evaluative nature of meaning. She writes:

This ever-present evaluative element in discourse makes concern with context absolutely essential. All the texts insist upon the necessity of considering language not as words in the dictionary which have only meaning potential but as the actualised meaning of those words used in a specific utterance (Morris, 1994: 4).

Thus, every enunciation by a speaker articulates the social relationships between two speakers and the dialects they speak. Therefore, according to Bakhtin, quoting another’s words is an important aspect of everyday language.

He believed that about half of ordinary speech consists of quoting another's words, either in a different intonation, framing them a certain way or placing them in a different context. Consequently, authors do not just reproduce social language but rather create an artistic image of it, and hybridisation of language is one of the ways to create this artistic image of language (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, 2007: 7). In a good text, argue Viljoen and Van der Merwe, the author comes to know his or her own language as it is perceived in someone else's language. The text becomes an intentional hybridisation and dialogising of different voices with the aim of creating artistic images of the historical, ideological and social background out of which each voice emerges (2007: 7). As Morris notes, it is this interaction between speakers that constitutes the capacity of language to produce new meaning (1994: 5). This essay will argue that both Trantraal and Mtshali's collections are excellent examples of how language can produce a new meaning and a new way of seeing the world.

Bakhtin also argued that because different classes within a nation use the same language, words become the dialogic site of class interaction. In such situations, "words become the arena of class struggle as different classes seek to re-accentuate a word with their meaning" (Morris, 1994: 12). This ability to re-accentuate a word ensures vitality and dynamism, and creates a capacity for further development in a language.

In his work *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (1994: 5) maintains that the postmodern condition exists as a boundary where a range of dissident voices can be enunciated to create something new. It is, according to Bhabha, crucial to think beyond the ordinary narrative and to focus on the processes produced in articulating cultural differences. He underlines the importance of borders and spaces between them – the in-between states of hybridity. The reason these spaces are important is because they create new articulations of difference. Borders become zones of intervention and zones of trauma where the ambivalence of the boundary between the public and the private becomes apparent. It is a space of intervention that introduces creativity. It becomes a third space of enunciation where the act of enunciation (utterance) is crossed by means of the writing (Bhabha, 1994: 7). As Viljoen and Van der Merwe note, bringing two language frameworks into dialogue means passing through this third space of enunciation where the two languages become intermingled so that the new creative hybrid form comes into being (2007: 9). Bhabha goes

even further and expresses the coloured South African subject as representative of this hybridity – as:

a difference “within”, a subject that inhabits the rim of an “in-between” reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive “image” at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world (1994: 13).

Both Trantraal and Mtshali’s collections are excellent examples of the workings of liminality.

5.4 Poetry as evidence of history

The collections reviewed demand new forms or altered modes of older poetic thought. They harness language to enter into the realm of the social: “a place of resistance and struggle” (Forché, 1993: 31) where books are published, poems read and protests recorded and disseminated; a sphere where claims against the political order are made in the name of justice. The importance of such poems, according to Forché, lies in the fact that they may be the only evidence that an event has in fact occurred. They may be the sole trace of an occurrence. The German–Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that modernity is marked by a worship of an oppressive force and a concomitant reliance on oblivion – forgetfulness that is “wilful and isolating” (Forché, 1993: 31–32). The poems that fall into the category of the poetry of witness will not permit such complacency. They lie in wait until an audience is reached who is ready to hear their record of history. Forché enunciates this by calling them collections of witness. Shelley refers to it as waiting for the right audience. The collections straddle the mysterious and fine line that exists between Shelley’s abhorrence of didactic poetry and Forché’s poetry of witness. The factors that differentiate poetry of witness from mere didactic poetry are crucial. The literary tropes utilised by the poet become vital to the authentic and lasting experience of the reader. The term trope derives from the Greek *tropos*, specifically from the verb *trepein*: “to turn, to direct, to alter, to change” (“Trope”, 2015). Poetry of witness contains tropes – poetic devices that alter the experience of the reader – that defamiliarise using the principle of *priem ostrannenija* or making things strange.

In the sections that follow, it will be argued that both Trantraal and Mtshali's collections employ the Shelleyian notion of writing for a future generation. In addition, they embrace the Formalist notion of using devices (such as language or inter-textuality) to increase the literariness of the poems, thereby defamiliarising the reality depicted. Finally, it will be argued that, in the manner of Bakhtin, they use a form of grotesque realism to work on the dominant ideology of society so as to make it strange. The poetry of Trantraal and Mtshali cross the divide from the didactic to the essential poetry of witness: the former through, inter alia, his use of postmodernist techniques, for instance, the Kaaps idiom and Rabelesque type imagery; and the latter through, inter alia, his use of an alternative language and extreme images.

Ek skryf poetry oo die liewe annie anne kant vannie kantlyn. As daa niks daa geskrywe innie margins staanie issit ma net oo dai stories nooit geskryf wod nie, of truthfully geskryf wod nie. As daa een ding is wat ek gelee et van opgroei in Bishop Lavis issit dié: daa is niks meer unimportant as die liewens van arm mense nie. As arm mense doodgan los hulle niks agte nie, niks trace dat hulle exist nie. Vi my is my writing history as told by the losers. My moments van insight het 'n short half-life, soe ek need om altyd die woorde innie most simple en vinnagste way oppie blaaie te kry. Dai is hoekom ek poems skryf en nie novels.

- Nathan Trantraal, interview with Ronelda Kamfer on *Litnet*, 17 July 2013

6.1 Overview of the collection

Nathan Trantraal's searing debut collection titled *Chokers en Survivors* is a unique look at township life on the Cape Flats, told from his own perspective of growing up in Bishop Lavis and Mitchell's Plain. It contains raw stories of failure and survival against all odds. The narratives relate, in a sketch-like and anecdotal style, the lives of people in the community and his own friends and family, such as his parents, brother, wife and grandfather. As Trantraal says in his interview with Annemarie van Niekerk on *Litnet* on 3 August 2013, poetry:

is mar net 'n klomp stories wat ek al vi jare vetel. Is osse ding. Os vetel dieselfde jokes en stories oo en oo. En toe skryf ekkit maa net nee. Daisie nice ding van n kak liewe, jy het altyd nice stories om te vetel agtena.

There are several striking aspects to the collection but the most fundamental is that it is written in phonetic Kaaps. Trantraal tells his intimate stories in a detached and matter-of-fact tone and style that brings home the horror of a violent and poverty-stricken life in the townships. Bernard Odendaal, in his review of *Chokers en Survivors*, writes that the language idiom becomes a manifestation of a translated life experience full of "marks of weakness, marks of woe" (a quote from William Blake's "London", which is reflected as a motto of Trantraal's collection) – a life which has "no future for you, no future for me"

(the second maxim taken from the work of the singer Craig Finn) (Odendaal, 2013). Joan Hambidge, in her review of *Chokers en Survivors* published on *Litnet* on 3 July 2013, writes that there are several aspects that identify this collection as different and special, not least of which is the fact that the collection is supported by Antjie Krog and Alfred Schaffer. Krog emphasises that we have not read something like this in Afrikaans before. Schaffer finds it collectively shocking, hilariously funny and moving (Hambidge, 2013).

The poet and his brother André are graphic cartoonists. This art form seeks to be subversive and critical, akin perhaps in a modern day context to Bakhtin's folk humour. The collection is dedicated to Trantraal's brother, "*Il miglior fabbro*", which Hambidge argues activates a reference to the poetic friendship between T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Pound assisted Eliot in editing large sections of *The Waste Land* and this may be a reference to the assistance and support of André Trantraal (Hambidge, 2013).

The complexities of living on the Cape Flats are revealed to the reader in a fearless manner. The collection touches on living in a world of violence – it is written in what Hambidge refers to as "gangster taal" (2013). Although it is shocking, it is, in parts, also funny. The poet places himself in the position of one dismissive of the status quo but there is, simultaneously, an awareness that he knows what is going on. The text is strewn with references to classical and well-known works, such as William Blake's *London* and Donatello's *David*. In the poem "Groot verseboek" he writes:

Ek ken allie shit al by heart

Sheila Cussons, NP van Wyk Louw, Ingrid Jonker (Trantraal, 2013: 38).

He sees himself as the "foremost authority on useless poetry" (Trantraal, 2013: 38) because in the world in which he lives poetry is a luxury. He seems ambivalent about the fact that he is enlightened and appears to be content to pretend he does not know what is going on. In his interview with poet Ronelda Kamfer published on *Litnet* 17 July 2013, Kamfer queries the two contrasting perspectives that are found in Trantraal's writing: one which flows from a literary education and one from a sort of pop culture. Trantraal comments:

ek dink as jy oor die wêreld wil skryf moet jy involved wies met die wêreld.
Jy kannie in jou ivory tower sit met jou hermetically sealed thoughts en

skryf oo 'n wêreld wat nie net een ding issie, maa 'n myriad van dinge at the same time, all the time. Ek gloe oek nie eintlik in cultural hierarchies nie en dai wod reflect innie writing (Kamfer, 2013).

One of the most important aspects of the collection is that it is written without sentimentality or nostalgia. The emotional detachment and reserve in the narration and imagery is characteristic of many of the pieces. The table of contents contains itemised timelines and reads, as Hambidge (2013) writes, like epitaphs. There is clearly a parting or farewell to a painful, wounded youth. The use of swear words is prevalent: “cunt”, “poes”, “kak”, “befok”, “fokkol”, “piel”, “nai”, “fok”, “pis” (Trantraal, 2013: 39, 21, 22, 23, 15, 17). In addition to Kaaps, various English words are also incorporated in the poems, such as, “gepawn” and “man-sized hit” (Trantraal, 2013: 31). The poet gives a real reflection of his people’s use of language.

As mentioned in section 5.1 of this essay, Forché writes that in order to be the witness of lived experience, poetry has to resort to a language more suitable to the times. Therefore the violence of Trantraal’s language, his “wilful assault on decorum” and “scabrous use of slang” (Forché, 1993: 42) all attest to the violence of the age. Extremity demands new forms of poetic thought. The language becomes what Forché refers to as “fragmented” (Forché, 1993: 42) – a concept not new to literary modernism, but one that gains urgency in cases of extremity. The fragments become indicative of a whole or a narrative that cannot be written. They evoke the story yet leave it unfinished, such that the reader becomes strangely aware of what has been left out – what cannot be said. This the French refer to this as *récit éclaté* – shattered, exploded or splintered narrative. Forché also makes reference to the writing of Paul Celan, a German poet who wrote in his native tongue while living in France after World War II. According to Forché, the alienation from his own language was augmented by Celan’s fractured use of the language and his quest led him to write in a fragmented, idiosyncratic dialect of his own construction, the grammar of which was tortured and its words were often new. Celan was, as Forché writes, “exiled within his own mother tongue” (Forché, 1993: 44). He used his mother tongue to register that exile. This sense of exile or linguistic alienation can be seen in Trantraal’s writing, which is an attempt to create his own poetic idiom. In so doing, he defamiliarises the language (Forché, 1993: 42).

There is an unmasking of the family unit. In “Hammie”, he writes about his mother:

My ma het my gelee
ommie sentimental te wiesie.
Die eeste ding wat sy gepawn et
was haa trouringe (Trantraal, 2013: 31).

The father is assaulted by his son in “Fifa 06”, where the poet writes with detachment:

Die way ek my pa skop is baie Fifa 06,
it voel bietjie fake and unconvincing
asof ek net deerie motions gan (Trantraal, 2013: 52).

The poems seek to tell a story in a deliberately unpoetic manner. As Hambidge (2013) writes, the collection is underpinned with the use of unpoetic and technical words such as porn, DVDs, CDs and karaoke. However, although poetical style and form are relatively weak in some pieces, they are deliberately so. The poet knows the works of Sheila Cussons, N. P. van Wyk Louw and Ingrid Jonker; he is not as unsophisticated as he makes out. It is the suffocating despair of reality that becomes the focus. This is where the poet wants to take us. In the opening poem “tot hie en nie vederie”, he warns: “Wies careful van mense wat hulle harte op hulle moue dra / wan sukke mense wysie altyd vi jou hulle regte hartie.” (Trantraal, 2013: 13).

As with cartoons, the poems seek to be accessible and use their medium to deliver a social comment. The shocking aspects of the text are central to a reading of the entire collection. Despite the almost cavalier manner in which many of the poems are written, on a thorough reading, as Hambidge (2013) suggests, the reader is forced to consider the poetic technique that is being presented. There is a strong narrative aspect to the poems and the last lines often carry evidence of the hard-hitting reality of life in a ghetto, which enables the poet to deliver a social comment.

In “South Korea”, the poet confesses:

omdat ek wiet my poetry is kak
en dat ekkie kan skryfie (Trantraal, 2013: 36).

6.2 The use of the Cape vernacular

As jy arm is, bly niks agter van jou lewe nie. Jy los niks geld agter nie. Daar's nie 'n sculpture wat agterbly nie, niks. Ek wou 'n record hou van daai mense.

- Nathan Trantraal, interview with Danie Marais published in *Die Burger*, 2 August 2013

Following the publication of Hambidge's review on *Litnet*, an interesting debate was raised on the nature of the Kaaps idiom. Trantraal, in his interview with Danie Marais (2013), criticises Hambidge's reference to Kaaps as a "gangster taal", asserting that Kaaps is not a limerick language but a people's reality. Robert J. Pearce, in his reply to Trantraal published on *Litnet* on 5 August 2013, confirms that he has been arguing for years that language theory only accepts Kaaps or "Flaaitaal" as "Tsotsitaal", rather than a language of the township intellectuals. He refers to the work of earlier writers, specifically Adam Small, who in his introduction to the second edition of *Kitaar my Kruis*, (1973: 9) writes that Kaaps is not what many refer to as Capey or Gammat-taal. Small states:

Kaaps is 'n taal, 'n taal in die sin dat die volle lot en noodlot van die mense wat dit praat, dra:... 'n taal in die sin dat die mense wat dit praat, hul eerste skreeu in the die lewe skreeu in hierdie taal, al die transaksies van hul lewens beklank in hierdie taal, en hul doodsroggel roggel in hierdie taal. Kaaps is nie n gappigheid of snaaksigheid nie, maar 'n taal (Small, 1973: 9).

In his comments in *Die Burger* on 10 August 2013, Steward van Wyk writes that the discussion about whether Kaaps constitutes a complete variety of Afrikaans has been on the go for some time. He refers to Frank Hendriks who has conclusively argued that varieties such as Kaaps are "deel van die groot Afrikaans geheel vorm en geldige kommunikasiekodes" (Van Wyk, 2013). Van Wyk believes that Trantraal's *Chokers en Survivors* is a welcome addition to the literary scene. Specifically, Trantraal's use of Kaaps shows the resilience of the language, illustrates that it is not static and provides a record of a more modern idiom – valuable material for dictionary publishers in acknowledging the versatility of Afrikaans. In an article published in *Die Burger* on 8 August 2013,

“Kaaps is ‘Straight en Diep’”, Michael le Cordeur canvasses the evolution of Kaaps. Le Cordeur believes that the debate is in fact a debate over the use of a language as a medium for teaching. A fundamental aspect in the delivery of a curriculum is how the knowledge is received, and this depends on how it is constructed and delivered. Research shows that the standard Afrikaans in which tests are presented is an impediment for learners who speak Kaaps, notwithstanding a policy that says that a language should not be a hindrance for teaching (Le Cordeur, 2013).

Le Cordeur (2013) recounts an interesting history of the language of Kaaps, which developed centuries ago. In 1701, 50 years after Jan van Riebeeck came to the Cape, there were four groups of people in the Cape: 1491 slaves (who spoke mostly Malay), 1265 Vryburgers (who spoke various different European languages), 550 VOC officials (who spoke Dutch) and thousands of Khoikhoi. Afrikaans was born when slaves from Asia and Africa, and the Khoikhoi needed to learn Dutch in the colony in order to interact with their Dutch masters and survive. The roots of Afrikaans lie, therefore, over three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. At that time, three types of Afrikaans were spoken in the Cape: Kaapse Afrikaans (by the slaves), Orange River Afrikaans (by the Khoi) and Oosgrens Afrikaans (by the Vryburgers and farmers from inland). The latter form of Afrikaans developed into what we know as standard Afrikaans, but nevertheless, there is agreement today that although this is the variety used for high-level functioning (such as reading and writing), it does not imply that it is a more correct (or pure) form of Afrikaans. Just so, Kaaps is not “weak Afrikaans” but simply another variety. This other variety of Afrikaans flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and can be found in the diaries of Louis Trichardt and the poems of Eugène N. Marais. With the freedom of the slaves in 1834, Kaaps was the predominant language of slaves and black people. Today, this variety is spoken from Bo-Kaap to the Boland, along the Cape’s west coast to the Sandveld, and along the Cape’s south coast to the Overberg and the Klein-Karoo. Notwithstanding the prolific use of Kaaps, children brought up speaking Kaaps are forced to do their homework in a form of Afrikaans that they are not familiar with and are prescribed books that present a worldview different from their own. In 2012, the minister of basic education in the Cape had to defend his choice of Adam Small’s drama *Krismis van Map Jacobs* as a prescribed work, after a member of parliament made accusations that that it contained racial language, blasphemy and weak

Afrikaans. In *Die Burger*, 28 May 2012, Johan Maarman comments on this and contends that there was a time when black people did not see the value in learning about the Great Trek. However, today, he argues, society understands that this history is also our shared history – one woven with hardships, courage and endurance. Matriculants who read *Krismis van Map Jacobs* will, argues Maarman, realise that it is about the lot of a group of people who are forcibly removed by apartheid legislation to the Cape Flats, where they live a hopeless existence and struggle to keep their identity. Texts such as *Krismis van Map Jacobs* accordingly teach the youth not to repeat the mistakes of the past (Maarman, 2012). It was Adam Small who established Kaaps in Afrikaans poetry and drama. According to Small, Kaaps is a full and self-standing language; an effective language of resistance to political unrest. In short, it is a language that articulates the deepest feelings of its users and foregrounds the concreteness of human suffering (Cloete, 2012: 116). Trantraal echoes these sentiments in his interview with Kamfer (referred to above) in a discussion on why Afrikaans is so “uncool”:

Omdat 'n mensie wiet watte woorde oud is en watte woorde modern issie. Ek dinkie die problem is mettie taal i.e., ek dink issie mense wie die taal praat, die mense wie soe lief is vi Afrikaans soes 'n ienagste kind. Die taal het niks space om te groei nie, isse coddled taal. Isse insular, exclusionary taal en daa is nie net iets uncool i.e. maa iets downright linguistically incestuous daa aan; die result is 'n taal met stunted development, met weak genes suppose ek (Kamfer, 2013).

Le Cordeur argues that language is not just a method of communication but is rich with cultural aspects and embodied identity and values – this is no different with Kaaps, which, he argues, deserves an equal status with Afrikaans. Kaaps, he concludes, possesses an energy unleashed by the people who speak it in the poor working-class townships on the Cape Flats and black suburbs elsewhere (2013).

Allan Megill, in *Prophets of Extremity*, offers an interesting discourse on the use of language by Friedrich Nietzsche, as he seeks a nexus between interpretation and myth in Nietzsche's writing. Megill refers to Nietzsche who, in his *Genealogy of Morals*, tells us “our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language” (Nietzsche, 1968, quoted by Megill, 1989: 95). According to Megill, Nietzsche seeks to escape from society's entrapment in

grammar that leads to “predetermined patterns of thought” (1989: 95). If the reader becomes conscious of this domination, it becomes possible to nullify its effect thereby “escaping from the net that language seeks to weave around us” (Megill, 1989: 95). Language, according to Megill, is an independent world, which through its metaphors creates truth. In this vein, he writes that:

the truth of language is in language, not outside it. Language is a prison from which escape is utterly impossible. If we employ one language, we will have beliefs congruent with that language, while with another language we will have other beliefs – and to both sets of belief the question of correctness will be irrelevant (Megill, 1989: 95).

In considering language in Nietzsche’s work, Megill points to the fact that we are able to see language not as “signification or as representation” but rather “aesthetically, as itself a work of art” (Megill, 1989: 96). If we do this, we are able to focus, not on what language means but on how it is expressed – thus, the interest of the work of art, like the interest of language, lies in the enigma it sustains (Megill, 1989: 96). Viewing language in this light, it is possible to return to Trantraal’s work and consider his extreme use of language in the same way – as a work of art and a means of sustaining enigma.

Megill goes further to consider how Nietzsche’s use of language provides a framework within which we are able to grasp his doctrine of eternal return. Megill quotes Nietzsche who believed that genuine philosophers were also “commanders and legislators” (Nietzsche, 1968, quoted by Megill, 1989: 96). Thus, their act of creating is a form of legislation. In order to bring about such “legislation” of their thoughts and will, genuine philosophers create a new language. A Nietzschean legislator “seeks to establish a new linguistic usage within which his own system of belief will be embodied and from which opposing systems will be excluded” (Megill, 1989: 97). As Megill points out, it is the interpretative will that is key. The new language constitutes a new system of interpretation that will bring the new reality into being (Megill, 1989: 97). Turning these ideas to the use of Kaaps by Trantraal, and setting aside the fact that we are not dealing with philosophy but with poetry, this essay argues that the use of language by Trantraal offers the reader this benefit. In other words, the use of Kaaps provides a framework that allows for a new form of interpretation and, in so doing, makes strange the reality that is presented.

6.3 *Chokers en Survivors* as a postmodernist work

Although it is true that there are aspects of postmodernism that no longer hold universal appeal, there are many aspects associated with it that assist readers in understanding postmodernist works of art. There are several concepts associated with postmodernism that are interesting and relevant in the context of *Chokers en Survivors*. This essay touches briefly on iconoclasm, formlessness and groundlessness, populism, and deconstruction.

6.3.1 Postmodernism

Terry Eagleton, in the preface to his work titled *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, describes postmodernism as a form of contemporary culture. It encompasses postmodernity, which alludes to a specific historical period and is “a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions or truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation” (Eagleton, 1996: vii).

According to Eagleton, postmodernism sees the world as inherently unstable – a set of dis-unified cultures that breeds scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms. It is a style of culture that reflects the intense changes in western society brought on by the world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry. Postmodernism reflects these changes in a “depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art” (Eagleton, 1997: vii).

Richard Rorty describes postmodernism as a tradition in European philosophy, which stems from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and denies the existence of a natural order, in the sense of an order that persists regardless of human language and history. It holds instead that it is possible to achieve a state of blessedness (a happiness that animals are incapable of achieving and results from the realisation that something central to human beings is also central to the universe, as contemplated by Plato) not by tailoring one’s language to fit something non-human, but rather by contriving a brand new language (Rorty, 1997: 14–17). The old Platonian idea that it is possible to grasp the natural order of things by penetrating through appearance to reality to bring about

blessedness is replaced by a new idea that blessedness can be obtained by finding a new way to talk.

6.3.2 Iconoclasm

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an *iconoclast* as “a person who attacks cherished beliefs or venerated institutions on the ground that they are erroneous” (“iconoclast”, 2015). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon reflects on this aspect of iconoclasm in postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism seeks to challenge, first of all, institutions – from the media to universities, from museums to theatres. Further, the important contemporary debate about the margins and boundaries of social and artistic conventions is also the result of a typically postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits (Hutcheon, 1988: 9). Through the de-canonising of beliefs, postmodernism attempts to contradict the expected, often deliberately alienating the reader. In so doing, it utilises artistic devices such as parody, irony and pastiche, and it denounces ethnic, gender and cultural repression. Indeed, Lehman writes that postmodernism “revels in comedy and exalts the spirit of parody and play” (2014: 3). It treats monuments of tradition with irreverence. Lehman articulates this as follows:

The distinction between artefacts of high and low culture gets levelled. Characters and lives are confused. Poems based on intricate rules are written in a kind of partnership with the language ... Generic conventions – particularly those of gangster movies, detective novels and comic strips – are cheerfully appropriated, and just as cheerfully deviated from, as the author wishes. Postmodernism is the triumph of irony (2014: 3).

Lehman goes on to describe various types of relatively unusual literary techniques, which have become associated with postmodernism. According to Lehman, fragments and hoaxes are postmodernist, as is the act of completing somebody else’s unfinished work, as are pseudonyms. Lehman writes that famous postmodernist writers, like Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov, favour the use of parables, labyrinths, mirror games, riddles and linguistic oddities. Repetition is postmodernism in action, as are games like the board game Clue. Experiments in discontinuous narration and the technique of incorporating the texture of multiplicity into fiction can be included in this genre of literary techniques. (Lehman, 2014: 3–4).

Joan Hambidge, in *Postmodernisme*, devotes several pages to a discussion of the importance of parody in postmodernist thought. Hambidge explains that the use of parody is the most important aspect flowing from postmodernist thought (1995: 31). She canvasses the use of debunking. It is by debunking the familiar that one is able to acknowledge the relevance of the artwork. The debunking involves both a recognition (in the sense that the old thought patterns are kept alive via the new discourse) and an exploration because postmodernism seeks to explore the possibility of new forms of expression. (Hambidge, 1995: 19).

6.3.3 Formlessness

Postmodernism is characterised by a desire for autonomy and circumscribing form. As the Russian Formalists demonstrated, deviation from the expected, foregrounding and departures from the conventional are the true essence of art. Art will, according to the postmodernist tradition, be much stronger for being shapeless, indefinite and even incoherent. (Holcombe, 2014: 1). Holcombe suggests that, with this in mind, postmodernism need not stick to genres or refrain from pastiche and parody. In fact, as discussed above, parody becomes central to the expression of a postmodernist ideal.

Jean-Francois Lyotard comes to an interesting expression of this aspect of formlessness in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he analyses the difference between modernist and postmodernist art. Both, argues Lyotard, seek to expose what romantic theorists called “the sublime” – that which is unmanageably large or complex. Both seek to conceive the inconceivable, express the sense of the inexpressible and take the measure of the immeasurable. But, in doing so, modernist art nevertheless holds the experience together or reduces it to some recognisable form. A postmodernist work, on the contrary, “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms” (Lyotard, quoted in Conner, 2004: 67).

6.3.4 Populism

According to Holcombe, Postmodernism is avowedly populist (2014: 3). It employs what is well known and easily accessible in vivid montages. It welcomes diversity and seeks to engage an audience directly, without levels of

book learning interceding. It encourages audience participation and mixes genres to make aspects, which might have been overlooked previously, interesting. It can illustrate social causes but does not insist on an underlying seriousness. This notion of populism emanates in part, according to Lehman, from comic strips, which provide infectious imagery. He cites the example of a freelance cartoonist, Martin Rowson, who published *The Waste Land* in the form of a comic book in England (Lehman, 2014: 12). Hambidge details this use of populist literature in postmodernism by conducting an analysis of comic strips such as *Asterix* or the even more familiar *Peanuts*, both of which have postmodernism leanings. According to Hambidge, one of the reasons for the success of this medium in postmodernism is due to the fact that comic books are so readily available and are read by such a wide audience (1995: 54).

6.3.5 Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a central element in understanding postmodernist thought and theory and was influenced to a large degree by the philosophies espoused by Jacques Derrida's elaborate writings. The central argument for deconstruction depends on the view that truth itself is relative to the differing standpoints and intellectual frameworks of the judging subject (Butler, 2002: 16). Butler argues that much postmodernist analysis is an attack on authority, reliability and the relationship of the arts to truth (Butler, 2002: 110). Hambidge articulates the relationship between deconstruction and postmodernism succinctly:

Die werklikheid, so leer die dekonstruksie ons, is immers ook 'n teks: gebroke, ondeurdringbaar, onbegrypbaar, onaf. Die postmodernisme gee dus 'n voorstelling van hierdie ingewikkeldheid. Daarom is die tekste nie logies, chronologies of ooit afgehandel nie. Die leser word gekonfronteer met 'n teks wat ondeurdringbaar is, net soos die werklikheid en die begryp daarvan nooit finaal of deursigtig is nie (2005: 12).

Hambidge goes on to explain that postmodernism supposes a dialectical relationship between the text and reality. The postmodern text expresses that which the reader alone understands – the broken nature of the text – because reality itself is broken (1995: 12).

In *Chokers en Survivors*, Trantraal has harnessed many postmodern techniques, which “underwrite” his collection. He can be classified as an iconoclast.

Through the medium of his poems, he lays bare the bleak circumstances that are a result of South African apartheid history. He rejects the familiar use of Afrikaans and introduces a new form of expression – Kaaps. He debunks myths associated with poverty, lack of education, violence and family. Being a graphic cartoonist, he understands the principles behind populism and harnesses these to provide accounts of events on the Cape Flats that are often humorous. His collection is an attack on authority and apartheid, laying bare, for all to see, the intense suffering that poverty, drugs and family violence elicit.

6.4 In the context of poetry and politics

In Formalist parlance, literature should be regarded as a practice that, through a variety of formal devices, enacts a transformation of received categories of thought and expression. Subverting patterns of thought imposed on reality by categories of ordinary language, by dominant ideological forms, literature is thus said to make such forms strange and, in so doing, weaken their grip on the ways in which we perceive the world. In this way, the Formalists argued, literature creates a vision of the object. It does not, as science does, organise the world conceptually but rather disorganises the forms through which the world is customarily perceived. Trantraal’s collection embraces these Formalist notions and utilises various devices (including his use of language, parody, humour and grotesque realism) that have enhanced the “literariness” of the collection. One of the most important of these is his use of language, specifically Kaaps – a language unfamiliar to traditional middle-class society but a language fighting for recognition in a new South Africa. This is where the success of Trantraal’s collection lies – in his ability to so work on the ideologies of western society that he makes them appear strange. It is a new form of writing, the product of a new set of social and cultural relationships, which establishes a connection between two cultural spheres previously kept separate. It is writing that brings us closer to the reality of life on the poverty line, as lived in townships. However, in the same vein as Shelley, Trantraal is not egotistical enough to believe that he can change the situation in places like Bishop Lavis or Mitchell’s Plain, rather, he offers us a first-hand insight into that world and uses shocking and disturbing images in the Kaaps vernacular to bring this reality home and make it strange. This does not mean that his

writing is not valuable; on the contrary its effectiveness is accentuated because it provides insight into the level of suffering.

As discussed, Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* is a study of the role of folk humour in Rabelais' work and is an attempt to account for a new and distinctive form of writing predicated on a new set of social, political and ideological relationships. Bakhtin contended that there were two separate ideological spheres: first, the official medieval ideology; and second, the world of folk humour, which constituted "a world turned upside down" (1965: 207, 208). Nathan Trantraal's *Chokers en Survivors* works in the same way to make strange the dominant ideology. For Trantraal, one could posit that the two ideological spheres could be: first, the views and ideas of middle-class white, coloured and black South Africans, dominated by middle-class lifestyle where families have relatively comfortable homes and sufficient food, and children go to school and obtain an education; and second, the world of Bishop Lavis and Mitchell's Plain where drugs, alcohol and prostitution are a way of life. This is a "world turned upside down" where official representation of the world is decentred by placing poverty, and not middle-class comfort, at its centre.

Consider Trantraal's use of grotesque realism in his bed motif, exemplified in his use of the word and image "kooi". *Kooi* is Kaaps for a bed. In a typical western society, the image of a bed is traditionally a positive one. Beds are located in bedrooms, which are usually places of quiet and peace, away from the rest of the family, and are often a private space, where one sleeps and rests. If visitors came to your house, one traditionally would not invite them into your bedroom. Trantraal turns this idea of the bed upside down. The word *kooi* is used throughout the collection and each time in disturbing and unconventional circumstances. In each case, the use of the word strongly contradicts traditional concepts that westerners may have concerning the bed and the bedroom. In the opening poem of the collection "tot hie en nie vêderie", he writes:

Wies careful van mense wat hulle harte op hulle moue dra
wan sukke mense wysie altyd vi jou hulle regte hartie.

Hulle regte hart is weggevou inne kissingsloep onnerie kooi (Trantraal, 2013: 13).

In “darkie bloed” the writer recollects when he was seven years old and his cousin told him that if you had a headache:

daas 'n klein darkie in jou kop
wattie dromme speel...

ek lê langs my kooi en skrie
ek is vol bloed
my kissing is vol bloed (Trantraal, 2013: 21).

The bed is the embodiment of his bad dreams, nightmares, fears and hallucinations. In “ek druk my naam innie as”, he writes: “ieman se skoen lê op my kooi, / sopnat gepis” (Trantraal, 2013: 22).

In the disturbing poem “Kinnesman”, the writer visits his friend Bryn’s house and is sent to Bryn’s bedroom:

Nou begin Bryn oppie kooi te rol
soese klein baby en begin praat en jokes maak
Ek sit nog so 'n halfier en dan wys ek hom
ek gaan nou march.
Ek vat sy han reluctantly
wan ek wiet dai man
het sieke nou net geskommel
voo ek hie by hom ytgestiek et (Trantraal, 2013: 42).

His despondency and disillusionment over the experience are voiced in the final lines:

Ek voel nou moeg – ek et meer as my quota
weirdness virrie dag experience.
Ek kom byrie hys en gan lê oppie couch.
Ek wens ek hoef nooit yt te gan nie,
wens ekkittie vriende gehattie
wens ek et nieman geken nie.
Ammel wat ek ken,
al my vriende seem om iemand annes te wies (Trantraal, 2013: 41).

In “Mamma HL”, the poet’s Aunty Una hides gangsters’ weapons:

onne haa kooi...

ampe soese safe house (Trantraal, 2013: 60).

The collection is rife with images of his grandfather, Derra, who is always lying on his bed: masturbating on the bed, eating on the bed, or demanding his lottery numbers as in “15 11 28 18 3 29 bonus: 48”, where Derra jumps “yttie kooi yt en sprint na hulle / met sy bal wat byte hang” (Trantraal, 2013: 63). In all these images, the notion of the bed and the bedroom is made strange, turned upside down, defamiliarised.

This takes us back full circle to Andrew Franta’s (2001: 765–785) argument set out in section 3.3 of this essay. He comments on Shelley’s *A Defence* and argues that the aim of Shelley’s writings is not to incite political or other action but rather to lay bare the facts for a future audience to consider and to enable them to have the privilege of a future perspective on the present. Shelley writes that the periods in history that have produced the greatest masterpieces have often been periods, if not of moral decay, of moral disorder. Moral disorder awakens the regenerative spirit in mankind. So, for instance, the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, where social and literary upheaval and reforms occurred, were both preceded by the masterpieces of Shakespeare and Goethe respectively. Trantraal’s collection seeks to do just that: to lay bare the facts, awaken the reader’s spirit and transform our experience of the reality expressed in the poems.

It is fitting to conclude with “Esprit”, one of the most hard-hitting poems of the collection.

Esprit

Riefka het vroeg gelee
dattie way na ’n man se hart
dee haa mag is.
sy wassie druggie op dêtien
enne prossie op vyftien.

Riefka wasse mooi meisie.
Ammel was mal oo haa oë
wat somtyds blou was
en somtyds groen.

Mense praat nou nog vannie goed
wat sy innie boys toilet gedoen et
en baie up-and-coming-meisies
gebryk haa career path asse blueprint.

Haa niefies en niggies wat saam haa op skool was
het simply na haa refer as “hai jintoe”
as hulle van haa gepraat et.
Rifka was confused oo haa niggies en niefies,
oo haa familie in general.

Sy was confused oo wie haa pa was.
Ammel het gewiet wie haa pa was, behalwe sy.
Haa ma het hom gelos net na sy gebore was
en vi haa gesê dat Mr Piel haa pa is.

Riefka kanittie onthou nie
wan sy was nog n baby
Maa haa ma
het eenkee met haa pa gestry
toe wôd sy soe kwaad
dat syrie man mettie baby gooi.

Later het haa pa heeltemal befok geraak
en somme n ayaman gewôd. En gefokof.
Maarit wassie all bêtie
wan haa ma het altyd vi hulle gesôg.

Riefka sallie dié onthou nie
wan sy was nog baie klein.
Maa een Christmas, sy was sieke vie,
en haa broe en haa suste was twaalf en tien,
toe koop haa ma vi hulle n Krismisboks:
vi Faheem en Sieda
n kis bier enne borrel whiskey,
en vi Riefka, omdat syrie baby was,
n borrel Esprit liqueur.

Toerie kinnes klaa gesyp et

lê Riefka innie jaat innie sand en swem
en allie grootmense staan en lag
vi hoe oulik sy lyk as sy dronk is (Trantraal, 2013: 16, 17).

No foreign sky protected me,
no stranger's wing shielded my face.
I stand as witness to the common lot,
survivor of that time, that place

- Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*

7.1 Social and political context

In order to understand and appreciate the impact of Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, it is useful to have a broad understanding of the political and social milieu in South Africa. The Dutch, who dispossessed the African people who had inhabited the land before them, first settled South Africa in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, there were four states in what is now known as South Africa. The British gained control over this area in 1806. The Afrikaners (descendants of the Dutch) remained the majority, fighting an unsuccessful civil war against the British between 1899 and 1902. The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 and was relatively autonomous within the British Commonwealth of Nations. However, South African laws became increasingly restrictive after 1913, even though the indigenous African and Indian people (brought from India to work as servants on the farms in the second half of the nineteenth century) had already been given only a few political rights under the act of Union. The African people were forced off their land into "reserves" in 1913 and allowed to work only in certain professions. The legal pillars of apartheid were constructed after 1948, with the electoral victory of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party.

In their introduction to *Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader*, editors Lee Sustar and Aisha Karim provide an overview of South Africa in the 1940s – a country characterised by racial segregation, institutionalised white supremacy and the denial of political rights for African and non-white people (Sustar and Karim, 2006: 21). From this time, South Africans had to be classified by race, were not allowed to marry outside their racial designations and could only live on and own property in designated areas. This restriction on abode was enforced through what became known as the "pass laws". Many artists and writers were confronted with a choice of whether or not to adapt to the highly

restrictive and humiliating conditions of the apartheid system. Public resistance meant the near certainty of repression and quite possibly incarceration – even death.

Apartheid drew on the race laws of Nazi Germany and the racial segregation laws of the American South. There was, however, within South Africa, longstanding traditions of resistance against British colonial rule, for example, the African National Congress was established as early as 1912. The economic boom of World War II opened the way for black labour to organise and form unions on a serious scale, raising the possibility of challenging entrenched racism under British rule. Deeply involved in these efforts was the South African socialist Left: divided between the South African Communist Party, the Pan African Congress and smaller Trotskyist organisations. A wave of resistance met the 1948 apartheid laws, which included the creation of the Coloured Affairs Department (CAD). Aimed at institutionalising a layer of “coloured” South Africans – people of mixed-race backgrounds – the imposition of the CAD also entailed their forcible removal from areas designated as white.

A new phase of resistance began with the 1952 Defiance Campaign, in terms of which the ANC defied apartheid laws with civil disobedience and mass protest. During one such protest, Nelson Mandela, destined to become the ANC’s leader and one of the world’s most famous political prisoners, was arrested. The apartheid regime retaliated with mass arrests, setting the stage for the 1956 treason trial, in which Mandela and other political prisoners and leaders were accused of treason. The phase of anti-apartheid resistance came to an end with the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960, where an anti-pass campaign ended in violence in a Sharpeville township and 69 protestors were shot to death.

A new crackdown ensued, including “banning orders” on individuals that prohibited them from attending meetings and, in some cases, publishing their work (Sustar and Karim, 2006: 22). In 1962, the General Law Amendment Act was passed, otherwise known as the Sabotage Act. This was aimed at those who, in any way, sought to change the state of society. A special clause in the Act enabled the minister of justice to “gag” those who might speak or write against the system of oppression that the world knew as apartheid. Anyone printing documents was liable to imprisonment. Among the people affected by this gagging order were novelists, short-story writers and poets. All these

people were silenced. In many cases, if writings were published, the publications, on entering into South Africa, were mutilated and the words torn out.

The gagging order was in itself what Dennis Brutus refers to (in an article published in January 1963 in *Fighting Talk* titled “Silent Poets, Strangled Writers”, and reprinted in *Poetry and Protest*) as “a sabotage of the human spirit” (Brutus, 1963, quoted by Sustar and Karim, 2006: 47). Men and women were forbidden to communicate their emotions, experiences and visions to their fellow men. In *Fighting Talk*, January 1963, under the pseudonym J. B. Booth, Dennis Brutus writes:

If the flame of freedom is ever to burn again in South Africa, it will have to start with small beginnings. It will have to start in the conscience of a few individual writers in South Africa and all over the world. It will have to start soon (1963, quoted by Sustar and Karim, 2006: 48).

In the text *Poetry and Protest*, Dennis Brutus questions the relationship between writers who functioned within “the system” and those who challenge it. The problem, he notes, is that there was often no communication between these groups of writers. So, for example, if you spoke to a white South African during apartheid, he or she would assure you that South Africa was a democracy. Because every white man and woman had the vote, for them South Africa was indeed a democracy. When a black South African spoke of hoping to achieve a democracy, it baffled white South Africans. The two ethnic groups were using the same terms but they were not communicating with each other. So even more fundamental than this failure of a shared language, was the failure to share values. They were really talking about different societies and, therefore, even when they used the same words, they were unintelligible to the other (Sustar and Karim, 2006: 202). Thus, as Jean Marquard (1971: 67) expresses in her review of Mtshali’s *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, the assumption that all men “know” the same world, is not always valid.

This concept is expressed in a different form by Viljoen and Van der Merwe (2007: 2) in *Beyond the Threshold*, when they comment on the transformative power of writing in times of a divided society. They make the point that the transformation of a person’s life story into a narrative and the rewriting of the narrative are not matters confined to individuals – they have communal

dimensions. Thus, in the telling of stories, communal identities are formed. However, in a divided society like South Africa, different stories about the same events are told. In the time of the armed struggle against apartheid, when Oswald Mtshali wrote *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, contrasting narratives existed. The narrative of the government would have been one of a war against a terrorist threat, whereas the narrative of the liberation army would have been a narrative of resistance against the evil of oppression and racial discrimination (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, 2007: 3). Poetry collections by writers such as Mtshali served to contribute towards the formation of this alternative narrative.

The anthropological theories of Van Gennep (1960) articulated in *The Rites of Passage*, theorised the threshold, the limen, in the context of social rituals like rites of passage. Van Gennep wrote at a time when Darwin's evolutionary sequence had caught the imagination of men and ethnographic studies of people from all portions of the globe began to make their appearance. Studies and theories of religious beliefs and ceremonies were of interest to Van Gennep, who wished to provide a rational explanation of religious behaviour by tracing historic origins and presenting functional interpretations. His analysis of the ceremonies accompanying a person's life crises, which he called *rites de passage*, is considered to be a unique contribution to anthropological study. Van Gennep saw regeneration as a law of life and the universe. In other words, the energy found in any system becomes spent and must be renewed at intervals (Van Gennep, 1960: viii). This regeneration is accomplished in the social world by the rites of passage given expression in the rites of death and rebirth. According to Van Gennep, when activities associated with such ceremonies were examined in terms of their order and content, it was possible to distinguish three major phases: rites of separation (common at funeral ceremonies); rites of transition (common in pregnancy, betrothal and initiation); and rites of incorporation (common at marriage ceremonies). He referred to these schemata as *rites de passage* (1960: 11).

In the first stage, initiands are symbolically separated from their usual social life. Then they cross the limen into a new transitional state where the social fabric they are used to is allowed to unravel. Here they enter a new space and time so different from the ordinary that it cannot be expressed in ordinary language but must be described in metaphor or as states of the in-between,

(which, incidentally, Viljoen and Van der Merwe liken to circumstances such as death, going underground or underwater, and going into eclipse (2007: 11)). In such states, culture can be recombined into new configurations, the old self dies and a new self can be born. The second stage of liminality is, therefore, a stage of transformation where a new sense of *communitas* can come into being. In the final stage, the initiand is reincorporated into society but as a different person.

If we consider Van Gennep's theory in the context of literature, its relevance can be seen in the notion that many texts (and this essay argues that Mtshali's collection) describe and represent liminal states and transformations, and the text itself becomes a liminal zone where transformation happens, bringing into being new ways of thinking. Literary texts are regarded as ritual actions that embody the different phases of rituals. They become liminal spaces and as such are an integral part of life – one of the ways we give meaning to the world around us. Viljoen and Van der Merwe go further to argue that this ritual carries readers away to their own liminal zones, where they can experience their own transformation and in this way change their life perspectives and cause a new *communitas* to be born (2007: 24).

In the early 1990s, the world was presented with a South Africa that had left apartheid behind and negotiated a seemingly peaceful settlement. Viljoen and Van der Merwe argue that, in so doing, a seminal threshold was reached and the familiar was left behind. However, although the negotiated settlement brought relief on the one hand, on the other, the new situation created a void in which the old narrative of strife became obsolete. A need arose for the development of new communal narratives to give meaning and sense to the new South Africa, to unite a divided nation. The country had reached what Viljoen calls "the first stage of liminality" (2007: 3), in other words, the disintegration of conventional structures. However, in this in-between state, there is a need for further development of the liminal process – for what Viljoen (2007: 3) refers to as "inner transformation" and "rebirth" – which will lead to a new sense of *communitas*. In the dilemma of being stuck between the past and the present, writers can play a meaningful role – they can go beyond the threshold and introduce readers to a world that was previously unheard of. Historically, poets such as Breyten Breytenbach, Oswald Mtshali and Mafika Gwala succeeded in crossing the threshold. Their aim was to debunk the

master narrative glorifying apartheid and, in this way, pave the way for peace. They produced poetry that opened the country's eyes to a new way of seeing the world.

Currently, writers are again playing an important role. In the void created by the loss of old narratives (like that of apartheid), they have the imagination and the power of words to create new narratives, new possibilities of existence (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, 2007: 3). Literary texts like those by Ingrid Winterbach, Zakes Mda, J. M. Coetzee and Nathan Trantraal and Oswald Mtshali's are creating new narratives. Their works and poetry collections are transformative and work toward creating a new communal narrative.

7.2 Black South African poetry in the 1970s

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings.
The dark time too
Which you have escaped.

- Bertolt Brecht , *To Those Born Later*.

In 1965, C M Bowra delivered a series of lectures at Queen's University, Belfast and these lectures were collated in his text *Poetry and Politics 1900-1960*. In his lecture titled, *The Change of Attitude*, Bowra (1966: 1-33) canvasses the connections between poetry and politics, specifically in light of the record numbers of wars (both international and civil) and social revolutions of this century. Bowra concludes that three distinct forces are at work when considering poetry and politics and he enunciates these as follows:

First, the reassertion of political integrity... means that any serious political poetry must take account of purely poetical values and nothing else. It must eschew rhetoric and make no concessions to public opinion just because it is public opinion. It must not be a means of indoctrination, nor must it present a manufactured point of view in order to make itself more impressive. Secondly, public and political themes, which elicit a wide range of response, must not be penned in artificial boundaries but appear in their natural richness and authenticity, even

though they contain bizarre, horrifying, squalid or ludicrous elements. Thirdly, the modern emphasis on the poet's obligation to be true to his own vision and sensibility means that, even when he deals with large concerns and complex ramifications, he must handle them in his own way, from his own angle, with his own unique insight (Bowra, 1966: 33).

Four important conclusions regarding black South African poetry in the 1970s can be drawn from this passage: first, it should, most importantly, eschew rhetoric and only take account of poetic values; second, it should not be a means of indoctrination; third, even though it may contain horrifying images, it must be authentic; and last, it should reflect the unique insight of the poet.

In 1977, A. G. Ullyatt provided a series of notes in "Dilemmas in Black Poetry" on the problems confronting black South African poetry. In Ullyatt's estimation, black poets writing political poetry in the 1970s faced two manifold problems: how to write and what to write. In considering the first point, Ullyatt points out that black poets had to determine how to make imaginative and meaningful use of a "centuries old, culturally-enriched" (Ullyatt, 1977: 51) language in the underdeveloped environment in which the poets found themselves. In other words, how did a black poet writing in the 1970s, make creative use of a language to which he had no cultural ties? Ullyatt writes that a common problem when writing in such a milieu is that poets fall into the trap of writing clichéd lines out of a lack of familiarity with the language and this leads to a loss of control. Often this is evidenced in the use of expletives, which are intended to convey rage but rather show a lack of control over the language and emotion of the poem, and end up "spoiling many poems" (Ullyatt, 1977: 53). On the second point, Ullyatt considers the difference between poetry of rebellion and resistance poetry. The distinction between rebellion and resentment is documented by Albert Camus in his book-length essay of 1951 *The Rebel* where he writes:

Resentment is very well defined by Scheler as an autointoxication- the evil secretion, in a sealed vessel, of prolonged impotence. Rebellion, on the other hand, removes the seal and allows the whole being to come into play ... According to Scheler, resentment always turns into either unscrupulous ambition or bitterness, depending on whether it is implanted in a strong person or a weak one. But in both cases it is always a question of wanting to be something other than what one is. Resentment is always resentment against oneself. The rebel, on the

other hand, from his very first step, refuses to allow anyone to touch what he is (Camus, 2000: 23).

In considering the distinction between a poetry of rebellion and a poetry of resistance, Ulyatt suggests that the poet should not succumb to the debilitating effects of resentment (which leads to an immature poetry) but should rather embrace the creative potential of healthy rebellion, which is often evidenced by an absence of a satirical tone coupled with careful restraint (1977: 58-59). In considering Mtshali's collection, it will be argued that Mtshali satisfies many of the desired conditions elucidated by Ulyatt for poetry of rebellion as opposed to poetry of resentment, as well as those enunciated by Bowra, governing what makes for valuable political poetry.

7.3 **Analysis of *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum***

When evil-doing comes like falling rain,
Nobody calls out "Stop!"

- Bertolt Brecht, *When Evil-Doing Comes like Falling Rain*

Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* was written and published in 1971. The work of poets such as Oswald Mtshali took their impetus initially from the South African Student Organisation's (an arm of the Black Consciousness Movement) reactions to apartheid legislation and subsequently from the 1976 disturbances. It is a form of poetry that has been vital in re-establishing a tradition of black writing in South Africa and promoting what Chapman refers to as "a serious, but often uncomfortable, re-examination by writers and critics alike on the function of, and the appropriate responses to, literature in a racially turbulent society" (2007: 11).

Initially, Mtshali's collection was aimed at a predominantly white liberal readership, selling a record number of copies for a book of poetry within South Africa. Nadine Gordimer in her foreword to *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* writes of Mtshali's "verbal magic" – that ability he has of "naming by experience", which for fellow black people provides a "shock of recognition" and for white people, "a revelation of a world they live in and never know" (Mtshali, 1971: xv). It is Mtshali's ability to synthesise experience that Gordimer believed had never happened in South Africa before. The collection is colloquial in tone, filled with ironic humour and vivid, concrete, personal images. The poet moves

from portraits of rural workers and evocations of tribal nostalgia to a group of disturbingly vivid poems about urban life in Johannesburg. His poems record the appalling conditions of township life, where violence is such a common occurrence that a man, having paused to watch a senseless murder on his way to church, might saunter home with “heart as light as an angel’s kiss / on the cheek of a saintly soul” (Mtshali, 2012: 132). The writing is, on the face of it, stylistically simple, yet as Gordimer points out, it is not as simple as it looks. It is balladic and lyrical. Gordimer argues that the most striking poems are those where the verbal magic – the creation of mood and place – contains a sting, leaving a question or statement burning in the mind (Mtshali, 2007: xv). For example, consider the evocative simplicity of “The shepherd and his flock”, which ends with a sudden insight into the mind of the boy greeting the white farmer’s children on their way to school and wondering if he will ever be able to go to school himself:

The rays of the sun
are like a pair of scissors
cutting the blanket
of the dawn from the sky ...

O! Wise Sun above,
Will you ever guide
Me into school? (Mtshali, 2012: 2,3).

Or the poignant “Boy on a swing”, conveying the pure sensation of the child on the swing with a heady brilliance, yet ending with concerned questions about the child’s jailed father:

The world whirls by:
east becomes west,
north turns to south;
The four cardinal points
Meet in his head.

Mother!
Where did I come from?
When will I wear long trousers?
Why was my father jailed?

Will he come back? (Mtshali, 2012: 8).

As Gordimer writes, the questions fuse together in the context of a township child's life and tell us everything we need to know about that life (Mtshali, 2012: xvi). Mtshali forgets nothing of the black man's rural past. This issue was also noted by Douglas Livingstone who in evaluating the collection, directs readers to Mtshali's deep connection to his rural background, which is coupled with the use of intense irony and often lyricism (Livingstone, 1976:53-56). In "I will tell it to my doctor", Mtshali describes his experience in evocative detail:

I will tell it all
to the doctor
as I sit on a mat
of woven grass and beads;
and dry monkey bones
shrink my head
and rattle the eardrums ...

I will give it
to the world
whose eyes are myopic with misery;
and this world will wink a smile,
and dandle me like a devoted mother,
and smother me with affection
I have never known before (Mtshali, 2012: 6).

In 1971, Jean Marquard reviewed the collection in *Shocking Insights*. For Marquard (1971: 67), Mtshali's voice is significant because it speaks from a previously closed and silent world. In "The master of the house", Mtshali writes:

Master I am a stranger to you
but will you hear my confession?
I am a faceless man
who lives in the backyard
of your house (Mtshali, 2012: 130).

Through the mechanism of the evocative poems, Mtshali exposes what is often overlooked through long habits of insensitivity – "the faceless man" is made

more and not less vulnerable by the insult that is his daily lot (Marquard, 1971: 68).

In “This kid is no goat”, Mtshali appeals to the white South African, to equally consider the validation of his dreams. A black South African can have the same dreams as a white South African. He writes:

I don't want to go to heaven when I'm dead.
I want my heaven now,
here on earth in Houghton and Parktown;
a mansion
two cars or more
and smiling servants.
Isn't that heaven? (Mtshali, 2012: 58).

In “Always a suspect”, Mtshali touches on the experience of a black man faced by prejudice. He describes how he dresses in a smart suit for work in the morning and yet still encounters the following humiliating experience, whilst walking to work:

side by side with “madam”
who shifts her handbag
from my side to the other,
and looks at me with eyes that say
“Ha! Ha! I know who you are;
beneath those fine clothes
ticks the heart of a thief” (Mtshali, 2012: 66).

In this way, Mtshali brings home, with a satirical thrust, the personal experience and humiliation of being subject to prejudice. The irony depends on a perceived discrepancy between commonly accepted notions of human dignity and the peculiar indignities heaped on black people by the apartheid mentality (Chapman, 2007: 70).

In “Nightfall in Soweto”, the poet describes how nightfall comes “like a dreaded disease seeping through the pores of a healthy body” (Mtshali, 2012: 98). He declares:

Man ceased to be man

Man has become beast
Man has become prey ...

Where is my refuge?
Where am I safe?
Not in my matchbox house
where I barricade myself against Nightfall...

Nightfall! Nightfall!
You are my mortal enemy.
But why were you ever created?
Why can't it be daytime?
Daytime forever more? (Mtshali, 2012: 98, 100).

The irony is deep and clear. The poet wishes not just for a physical turn of night to day but for a change in the circumstances of his life and the constant fear in which he is forced to live.

Mtshali's poems are strewn with images of bread, eating and hunger. In "Portrait of a loaf of bread", he describes how he looks back:

to the rolling fields
waving gold-topped wheat stalks
mowed down by the reaper's scythe,
bundled into sheaves,
carted into the mill
and ground into flour ...

Brought to the café
warmly wrapped in cellophane
by "Eat Fresh Bread!" bakery van;
for the waiting cook
to slice and toast
to butter and to marmalade
for the food-bedecked breakfast table. (Mtshali, 2012: 10).

But he carefully ends with his ironical and pointed reference to the labourer who:

with fingers caked with mud

wet cement of a builder's scaffold
mauls a hunk and a cold drink
and licks his lips and laughs
"Man can live on bread alone" (Mtshali, 2012: 10).

In "A brazier in the Street", four street urchins are huddled around a pot "smoking cigarette stubs and swopping stories / like seamen telling tales over a bottle of rum", when one of them mumbles that he "once ate a loaf of bread with nothing..." (Mtshali, 2012: 42). At this point, a buxom woman removes the cooking pot and the urchins are "gulped down" by a "starless night" (Mtshali, 2012: 42). Mtshali identifies with the pitiless situation in which the urchins find themselves. He makes the situation real and takes the reader to that place of their existence.

In "A lost coin", he describes a street urchin who:

rummaging for cigarette stubs
scoops it up,
and rushes to a Greek café -
bread for life?
sweet for joy? -
a chocolate slab
of "Happiness"
to be swallowed in a gulp
into an empty tummy,
and come out as sweet nothingness
in an alley toilet (Mtshali, 2012: 52) .

The implication and irony is clear. The finding of the coin is not going to bring the urchin comfort or alleviation from poverty in the long term. It might give him a brief respite, "a chocolate slab of happiness", but it is otherwise "sweet nothingness".

In "Men in chains" he describes a train stopped "at a country station" carrying six men "shorn of all human honour", "bare feet", "wrists handcuffed, ankles manacled" (Mtshali, 2012: 18). One man appeals to the sun: "Oh! Dear Sun! / Won't you warm my heart / with hope?" But the poem ends with the train

going on “to nowhere”, evidencing the hopelessness of the situation that presented itself to the men (Mtshali, 2012: 18).

In “The face of hunger” he describes a starving child in terms that force the reader to witness the brutal reality of the situation:

I counted ribs on his concertina chest:
bones protruding as if chiseled
by a sculptor’s hand of Famine.

He looks with glazed pupils
seeing only a bun on some sky high shelf .

The skin was pale and taut
like a glove on a doctor’s hand.

His tongue darted in and out
like a chameleon’s
snatching a confetti of flies.

O! Child,
your stomach is a den of lions
roaring day and night (Mtshali, 2012: 90).

In “My metamorphosis”, Mtshali describes how once he was a “sapling of boy” but then “... landed in a prison cell / where introspection gnawed at my heart / like a rat on a chunk of cheese” (Mtshali, 2012: 120). He goes on to explain how it was that he survived in prison:

I am a mouse of sublimation,
introvert, waiting for night’s cover;
when I can pillage the cupboard
of my rare bread, solitude
and feed my hunger to read,
to dream, and to write (Mtshali, 2012: 120).

The poet does not permit himself intellectual isolation. The longing of a boy is wrenched out of its traditional framework and not of a vague romantic kind; it is specifically for the education that society denies him. As Marquard (1971: 70) notes, the metamorphosis is the adaption to this denial of self-fulfilment,

when the dreams of youth are replaced by dreams that adult endurance cherishes as a luxury and not a right. It is acceptance without abdication of personality.

In *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, prayer is not rejected but is shaped by circumstances, in which a simple surrender would undermine the spiritual dignity proper to manhood. The complex vitality of poems like “On drowning sorrow (reflections of a man)” comes from the recreation of a mood that grows from the contradictory impulses of resignation and the refusal to submit. This fusion of ideas gives Mtshali’s work a religious energy, which transcends the bleak conditions of the life he describes (Marquard, 2007: 70). That the Christian God recognises defiance as well as humility is a recurring theme in many of the poems. Many times, Mtshali grapples with the trappings of Christianity and exposes the failure of orthodox religion to give solace to the oppressed. Nevertheless, he does not turn away from the Christian message heard, ironically, not from the pulpit but from the voice of his mother in “A voice from the dead”, where she says: “Hell is the hate flickering in your eyes” (Mtshali, 2012: 38).

In “On drowning sorrow (reflections of a man)”, the poet appeals to the reader:

Where do I drown my sorrows
if not in the drum
of wine, whiskey and beer? ...

With what do I blunt my feelings
if not with the weed wrapped in the green seed
crackling in the brown paper greased with saliva?

How do I satisfy
my instincts as hot as cinders,
if not with the tender flesh of a female
flushed with blood as I squeeze her breasts
I caress her thighs!

All sorrows
are banished now –
but woe when they return
to capture my soul! (Mtshali, 2012: 96).

Yet, despite the despair that Mtshali is faced with, both in his own personal life and through the experiences of a shared community, he does not lose hope and his work is characterised by an underlying compassion. In “Handcuffs” he describes that he feels handcuffed and:

the itch in my heart
grows deeper and deeper
I cannot scratch (Mtshali, 2012: 134).

Notwithstanding this, he writes:

I can only grimace at the ethereal cloud,
a banner billowing in the sky, emblazoned.
“Have hope brother,
despair is for the defeated.” (Mtshali, 2012: 134).

Marquard believes that even though some of the poems have structural or formal defects, the achievement of the poems, taken collectively, is considerable. Their impact, she believes, is due to the serious and moving content, and the fine qualities of personality and character – the wit, courage, honesty and dignity – that the poet reveals. Their clarity of perception, imaginative sensitivity, strength of feeling and moral energy enable the reader to judge the poems on grounds other than just the aesthetic (Marquard, 2007: 69, 71).

In the introduction to *Selected Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, James Reeves writes quite openly that Lawrence was not necessarily technically proficient. However, Reeves goes on to explain that “technical perfection without poetic insight” is one of the most common problems of young poetry today (1977: i). Reeves writes that Lawrence’s poetic insight stemmed from his abnormal sensitiveness, which was connected with the tubercular malady that afflicted Lawrence for much of his life. This left him with what Reeves terms an acute “emotional and physical sensibility” (1977: ii) that drove him to self-expression. It is this hypersensitive nature in Lawrence’s writing that, according to Reeves, makes Lawrence exciting or even painful to read. And, it is sensitivity of this nature that is depicted in the work of Mtshali. Although some of the pieces may fall short of technical perfection, the poetic insight, vivid imagery, use of English as the chosen language and use of irony and

parody all work together to transport the poems, allows them to make strange and to understand the poet's predicament in a new and fresh light.

7.4 In the context of poetry and politics

Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* fits into the mould of what the Russian Formalists viewed as a text that subverts the patterns of thought of the time. The collection made strange the dominant ideological forms by bringing the reader into the realm of the township dweller. It allowed the white liberal South African to experience – through the mechanism of the idiom, language and lyrical quality of the poetry – life as a black South African in the time of apartheid. In this, it is a uniquely placed text, which, although it did not generate a change in the social or political mores of the times, acted as Shelley would have hoped: to preserve its address for a future audience acting as a mirror of the “gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present” (Shelley, 1854: 109), enabling us to see the injustice for what it was.

As a final point, consider the lines of “At heaven's door”. Here the poet describes how he has been knocking at heaven's door but has only been met by silence. It is a poem that deals with the issue of discrimination, handled with a devastating understatement and detachment:

There
is only silence.
Where are the servants –
I mean the angels? ...

When
the Master at last
says
“Come in”,

Will they
let me in
through the front
or at the back entrance? (Mtshali, 2012: 102).

8 CONCLUSION

In considering the relationship between poetry and politics, this essay commenced with an overview of Shelley's *A Defence*, in which he declares that poets "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley: 1845: 109). Shelley argues that poetry, provided it is not didactic or overly moralistic, possesses a transformative power that renders it eternal. The poet alone, argues Shelley, has inspired vision to reflect this. The arguments in *A Defence* recognise that aesthetic experience has political value because it generates critical thought as a form of truth. Poetry becomes a formal process that produces critical thinking, which does not always translate into progressive politics but is important because it defamiliarises and allows us to see things in a new and fresh light. Although this going out of the self does not ensure a specific political response, it can lead to social renovation. Thus, the tension between the promise of poetry and what poetry actually delivers can be resolved if one considers the paradox that poetry is revolutionary because it stimulates critical thought, without which change is inconceivable. Therefore, although poetry may not forge a link between perception and action, it fuels critical thinking and is a pre-requisite for action.

The essay continued with Andrew Franta's view that we should not focus on poetry's role in effecting political change and intervention, but rather focus on the formal aspects of poetry. In this light, poetry is not a way to intervene in politics and political conflict but rather is defined by its ability to transcend and be transmitted from one generation to the next. Its time frame is extended to reception by future readers – until the materialisation of a proper audience. It is an effort to conscript the future for political purpose – a recognition that events have occurred and as such these events will have a history. It provides an account of what has happened. Although it cannot effect political change, poetry's significance lies in the fact that it presents a form in which the politics of the time can be understood.

The essay then considered the effect of Russian Formalism – a system of literary scholarship that emphasised the literary work and tried to formulate mechanisms to distinguish literary works. The Formalists emphasised the role of literary devices in determining the literariness of texts and searched for formal properties that distinguish poetry from ordinary language and thereby comprise artful literature. According to the Formalists, literary texts, through the use of devices, make strange our reality – they

dislocate our perceptions and thereby renew our interest. They defamiliarise the form through which we perceive the world. In the literary text itself, literariness can be determined by a consideration of, inter alia, the mode of presentation of the text by the poet. It is found in the poet's use of words, and here poetic diction becomes vital. So too, do poetic images, rhythm and euphony – all devices used by the poet to make strange so as to transform existing patterns of thought. The poet's responsibility becomes the manipulation of language.

In a short overview of the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, the essay revealed that Bakhtin had reworked the Formalists' notion of literariness and put forward the idea that two ideological spheres can exist in society, namely, the official sphere and the sphere of folk humour. It is possible (utilising techniques such as parody, humour and grotesque realism) for the world of folk humour to discrown the official ideology and, in so doing, make strange that ideology. Bakhtin argued that the use of grotesque realism can be effective in inverting the official, social, moral and political order of the day. This reversal challenges existing dogma and permits a more open-minded consciousness.

The study then considered poetry as the witness of a lived experience. Carolyn Forché enunciates that poetry must resort to a language more suitable to the times, in order for it to transcend current atrocities. This was canvassed by William Wordsworth years earlier in "The Preface", where Wordsworth explains why he resorted to the use of the "real language of men" (1800: 21). Derek Attridge concludes that in order to render this real language poetic, a subtle focus of gaze is required – and that belongs to the poet, whose responsibility it is to craft the language into something beautiful and, in the words of the Formalists, make it strange. Historically, Adam Small embraced the use of the language of the "coloured people" in the pursuit of dialogue and justice in South Africa. In difficult times, Small argued, South Africans must strive to find other forms of communication that are more authentic.

Alongside this discussion on the use of language, the relevance and import of liminality in literature and poetry was canvassed. Specifically, the use of language to harness the transformative power of liminal zones was considered. Here it was argued that language is essentially dialogic in nature, in other words, the intentional hybridisation of different voices can be used to create an image of history and the social milieu from which the voice comes. The use of language, therefore, harnesses a transformative potential and power, and the treatment of different voices constitutes the capacity of language to produce new meaning.

In the analysis of Nathan Trantraal's *Chokers en Survivors*, the reader was provided with a look into the violence of township life and the effects of poverty on the Cape Flats. Here it was argued that the use of the language idiom by Trantraal is vital. The violence of his language, his assault on decorum and the use of profanity, mixed with English words and inter-textual references to well-known South African writers, evoke a fractured use of language, through which he defamiliarises the language. He reflects his alienation from Afrikaans and creates his own poetic idiom through the use of language. It was also argued that his use of Kaaps reflects a resilience in the Afrikaans language. Afrikaans is not static but possesses an energy that can be unleashed by the people who speak it. The use of extreme language is seen as a method of sustaining the artistic value and enigma of the poems. In Nietzschean terms, Trantraal has sought to establish a new linguistic usage, which embodies his own belief system to the exclusion of opposing belief systems. This goes some way to producing a new language. He utilises postmodern techniques to contrive this new language and, in so doing, finds a new way to talk and experience reality. His approach is iconoclastic, opposing the beliefs and practices that are widely accepted, and he does this to push the boundaries of social convention.

In the analysis of Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, the essay canvassed the social and political milieu in which the collection was written. It was found that in divided societies, different narratives evolve and poetry collections are means through which poets can contribute to the development of alternative communal narratives. Arnold van Gennep's theories of the threshold were considered relevant in understanding how the energy in social systems can be regenerated through rites of passage. In rites of transition, or the second phase, transitional states of liminality are reached and new ideas can be born and a new sense of *communitas* developed. The text itself becomes a liminal zone that helps to open the eyes of the country to a new way of seeing the world – to enable people to cross the threshold to give greater meaning to social circumstances.

Assessing certain fundamental principles relating to black South African poetry produced in the time of apartheid, it was concluded that such poetry should eschew rhetoric and take account of poetic values, not be a means of indoctrination and be authentic. Mtshali's collection meets all three criteria and can be considered a poetry of rebellion as opposed to a poetry of resentment. Mtshali's use of the English language provided a shock of recognition for white liberals and afforded them the chance to experience his reality in a new and fresh light. His vivid poems haunt the reader with

images of poverty, starvation and humiliation but are also intermingled with sentiments of hope, love of family and commitment to a better way of life. His use of satire, irony and parody are devices that make strange the reality of life under apartheid.

In conclusion, this essay acknowledges that poets are not necessarily legislators. Rather, if poets harness a poetry of rebellion, forging their craft with inspired vision, as advocated by Attridge, they are able to provide a record of events and circumstances of life that will generate critical thinking and be transformational. As Albert Camus writes:

Rebellion arises from the spectacle of the irrational coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impetus clamours for order in the midst of chaos, and for unity in the very heart of the ephemeral. It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage come to an end, that there be built upon rock what until now was written unceasingly upon the waters. It aims to transform (Camus, 2000: 16).

Poetry that harnesses rebellion of this kind – if it accords to the principles of literariness as expounded by the Formalists, and if it harnesses the power of relevant literary tropes – remains in perpetuity until an audience comes into being, who is ready to recognise and reflect on its content.

9 EPILOGUE

In 1935, Gertrude Stein was lecturing at the University of Chicago when a student asked her for the meaning of “rose is a rose is a rose”. This was her reply:

Now listen. Can't you see that when the language was new – as it was with Chaucer and Homer – the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing really was there. He could say “O moon”, “O sea”, “O love”, and the moon and the sea and the love were really there. And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just worn-out literary words. The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them; they were just rather stale literary words. Now the poet has to work in the excitingness of pure being; he has to get back that intensity into the language. We all know that its hard to write poetry in a late age; and we know that you have to put some strangeness, as something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun. Now it's not enough to be bizarre; the strangeness in the sentence structure has to come from the poetic gift, too. (Stein, 1935, quoted by Meyerowitz, 1941: 7).

The collections of Nathan Trantraal and Oswald Mtshali seek to restore the “excitingness” of pure being as enunciated by Gertrude Stein. They aim to re-introduce intensity into language and, in this way, to incorporate something strange and unexpected. This, in turn, enables the reader to experience sensations in a new light. The aesthetic experience generates critical thought and this leaves the work open for contemplation by future generations of readers. In this way, poetry's time frame has been extended.

Viljoen and Van der Merwe argue that boundaries act as membranes do – they filter certain things in and others out. They act as thresholds – places where you can cross into a different state of being – and they become zones of heightened creativity, a creativity they describe as coming “from the margin” (2007: 10). In a world consumed by the violence referred to in the abstract of this essay, the poetry collections of Trantraal and Mtshali are evidence of poetry that comes “from the margin”, that inspires critical thought and, in this way, becomes transformational.

10.1 Biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley



Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at Field Place in Horsham, Sussex on 4 August 1792. After some years at private schools, Shelley went on to Eton in 1804. There, his independence of spirit was recognised and his rebellion against established authority cemented (Needham, 1931: xv). While at Eton, Shelley turned his attention to problems of humanity. His reading of Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793) was to remain his social gospel for many years to come. From a young age, he dedicated himself to the cause of human liberty and progress (Needham, 1931: xvi). In 1810, he attended Oxford, where his ardent love of liberty and hatred for organised Christianity (which he saw as a form of tyranny) led him into trouble. In 1811, he published an anonymous pamphlet titled *The Necessity of Atheism*, where he set out to show that the existence of God cannot be proved either by historical testimony or reason. He refused to admit or deny authorship of the pamphlet and the university authorities consequently expelled him for contempt of authority.

He moved to London where he became acquainted with Harriet Westbrook. The two later eloped to wed in Scotland in August 1811, Harriet being only 16

years old and Shelley 19. The couple moved to Ireland where Shelley became involved in the struggle for political liberty and religious independence (Needham, 1931: xvii). In 1813, Shelley published his first serious poetical work, *Queen Mab*, a long poem in free verse where he summarised his philosophical, scientific and social beliefs. He became estranged from his wife and they separated the following year. A few weeks later, Shelley, much to the outrage of the social community, left for Europe with Mary Godwin, Godwin's daughter.

When they returned to London, Shelley moved away from the influence of Godwin, toward the spiritual teaching of Wordsworth, Plato and Christianity. In 1816, he spent part of the year with Byron in Switzerland. However, his year was marred by the suicide of Harriet and his inability to obtain the subsequent custody of his two children. It seemed these problems turned his mind back to social problems and the themes of liberty – political, religious and intellectual. (Needham, xvii). His great work of 1817 was *The Revolt of Islam*, a poem of five-thousand lines of Spenserian stanzas, which, in spite of the apparent weakness of plot and characterisation, is a triumph of poetic artistry and typical of his genius. His health weakened and in March 1817 he left England for the warmth of Italy, where he recovered and his spirit regained its natural courage. *Prometheus Unbound* was his first glorious poetic outcome of that year. This great lyrical drama illustrates the conception of poetry, also found in *A Defence*. *Prometheus Unbound* was soon followed by the great odes: *To the West Wind* (1819), *To Liberty* (1820) and *To Naples* (1820). The poems written in the last eighteen months of Shelley's life reflect his idealistic and Platonic leanings. *Adonais*, a pastoral elegy on the death of Keats, is reminiscent of pastoral Greek poetry and a declaration of faith in the immortality of the spirit, a faith inspired by Plato. The influence of Dante can clearly be seen in *Epipsychidion* and is also evident in *The Triumph of Life* (Needham, 1931: xix).

At this point, public opinion of Shelley and his wife had not changed in England and they lived as veritable outcasts in Italy. But many friends, one of whom was Lieutenant Williams, joined them and it was with Williams that Shelley was able to indulge his favourite sport of sailing. On 1 July 1822, Shelley and Williams sailed to Casa Magni but their yacht was overwhelmed by a sudden storm, for which the area is notorious. The boat sank and the bodies of both

men were washed ashore. The body of Shelley was cremated at a cemetery in Rome, not far from the burial place of Keats (Needham, 1931: xx).

10.2 Biography of Nathan Trantraal

Nathan Trantraal was born in Cape Town in 1983. In 2003, he and his brother André debuted with their first comic strip, “Urban Tribe”, published in the *Cape Argus*. In 2008, Tafelberg published his graphic novel titled *Stormkaap: Drome kom altyd andersom uit*. This was followed by the release of *Coloureds*, a graphic comic set in the townships of Bishop Lavis. It is a series of short stories depicting how two children, Nigel and Caitlin, live out daily township life (Trantraal, 2013).

Trantraal is a graphic cartoonist who currently produces the weekly cartoon strip, “The Richenbaums” for the *Cape Times*. He lives in Cape Town with his wife, the poet Ronelda Kamfer, and their daughter, Seymour.

Chokers en Survivors, published by Kwela in 2013, is Trantraal’s debut poetry collection. It has been shortlisted for the Elisabeth Eybers Prize for Afrikaans and English Poetry 2014 and won the 2013/2014 Universiteit van Johannesburg se Prys vir Skeppende Skryfwerk in Afrikaans.



10.3 Biography of Oswald Mtshali



Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali was born in Kwabhanya (Vryheid), Kwa-Zulu Natal on 17 January 1940. After completing secondary school, he moved to Soweto hoping to study social work. Apartheid legislation prevented his enrolment but he studied via correspondence, obtaining a diploma with the Premier School of Journalism and Authorship, affiliated to London University. He worked as a messenger in Johannesburg, drawing on his observations of the city to write poems, which became the subject of his first collection, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (Jobson, 2013). Lionel Abrahams of Renoster published the collection in 1971, with a foreword written by Nadine Gordimer.

Following the extraordinary success of this debut collection, Mtshali moved to the United States where he studied at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. This was followed by undergraduate studies at the New School of Social Research and an MFA from Columbia University. His second collection, *Fireflames*, was published in 1980, while working as deputy

headmaster at Pace Commercial College in Jabulani, Soweto. With its overt criticism of the South African government of the time, it was banned and Mtshali returned to Columbia University in 1988 to pursue his doctoral studies. He taught in the United States until his return to South Africa in 2007. His focus now includes Zulu lexicography, a translation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into Zulu and the collection and recording of Zulu traditional folk songs (Jobson, 2013).

In 1971, he was awarded the Southern Africa English Academy Poetry Award; in 1974, the Olive Schreiner Prize for Poetry; in 2007, the South African Lifetime Achievement Literary Award; and in 2013 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the North-West University, Mafikeng, South Africa. He lives and works in Soweto (Jobson, 2013).

Sounds of a Cowhide Drum

POEMS BY



Oswald
Mbuyiseni
Mtshali

10.4 Autobiography of Michèle Betty

10.4.1 History

I was born in Johannesburg in 1972 to parents of Lebanese descent. The culture, food and Catholic religious ethics of this tradition were inculcated in me from a young age. The spiritual grounding of my childhood underlies and is reflected in many of my poems. When travelling, I often visit churches in foreign countries and do not experience estrangement or a sense of not belonging. Below is “Abbey Notre-Dame de Sénanque”, a poem written after visiting an abbey in the South of France:

Abbey Notre-Dame de Sénanque

“The way to love God
is to love without measure”
Saint Barnard, Treatise on the love of God

As we descend into the valley,
the abbey, fortress-like,
rises with a cross at its helm,
softened by a rose window
hewn into the western wall and
drifts of lavender bushes sown
row upon row then neatly pruned.
A gardener appears,
weed-eater wound casually
around his waist,
leather strap leaning into
the curve of his shoulder,
stalks of dried lavender
poking out from behind
his waist and thighs
blonde beard thickened and clipped
as neatly as the lavender bushels,
a nod and a gentle upturn of his lips,
grey-green eyes arresting.

II

Straying to the church
laid out in a cross shape,
four semi-circular vaults
rise to cradle a six-lobed arch
reaching to the cupola,
and there sitting
in darkness in the nave
amongst double and triple arches
the cool, austere cement interior
is warmed, transformed
by streams of light folding
through the three arched
stained-glass windows.

III

Six Cistercian monks
cross over to the choir stalls
heads bowed low to chant,
dominus santé, dominus santé,
seven times a day
and throughout the night,
and early hours of the morning
they worship,
when glancing up as they look up,
I see, clothed in
cream-coloured robes
curling to the floor,
the grey-green eyed soul,
song of an angel
on his upturned lips
raising his eyes to the light.

10.4.2 The meshing of my history and writing

I grew up in a strict family with a code of no complaining and no telling, and in retrospect this was indeed a strange circumstance. It was only after many years, in adulthood, that I realised the way my family had lived, continually concealing pain, was not normal or healthy. As Carl Gustav Jung writes in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, “Anything that is concealed is a secret. The maintenance of secrets acts like a psychic poison, which alienates their possessor from the community” (1933: 31).

Academic work was something that seemed to come naturally to me and I knew that I wanted to go to university to read for a degree. University was a breath of fresh air. I felt as though I had never really understood or acknowledged issues of race, gender and religion prior to this stage of my life. Gender issues held particular fascination for me, coming from my conservative, traditional background. I studied sociology, psychology, industrial psychology and law, going on to complete an LLB degree. These postgraduate studies changed my ethos and way of thinking, and opened my world to the grey spaces between black and white. It was during my university years that I first began writing poetry, using it as a mechanism to release emotion. Studying law provided me with an agency that I had not previously experienced. I was able to exert control over my own thoughts and express an opinion that people listened to and valued – a new and unique experience for me.

I served articles at a Johannesburg litigation firm, and then worked at Investec Bank for several years until I was employed by Webber Wentzel Bowens in their mergers and acquisitions department. Work became all encompassing and I stopped writing, and did not go back to it for some time. It was in the midst of these years that I married and had two children. My family subsequently relocated to Cape Town and I stopped working. Away from the strains of a legal career, I could consider the world through my own eyes again and I began to write. I was determined to learn more about poetry and hoped to read for an MA at UCT, but I had no portfolio. On the advice of a friend, I joined Finuala Dowling’s monthly poetry workshops and took 18 months to slowly build a portfolio, which I submitted to UCT. When my UCT supervisor called me for an interview and I was later accepted into the creative writing programme, my life changed.

10.4.3 The objective correlative

My poetry has, over the last two-and-a-half years, changed materially from its initial form. In many ways, when I began writing poetry, I used the poems as catharsis for painful life experiences. In retrospect, I recognise that many of my earlier poems were confessional in tone and focused on extreme moments of individual experience and personal trauma. I have included for your reading “Disturbia” and “If only you said”:

Disturbia

In the week before
my father died,
we were gripped
by an unseen hand,
first felt in the
fleeting whine of the
eighteen-wheeler that
clipped out car’s side mirror
and then, in the convulsions of
a small body, as we waited on that
gravelled and sandy verge,
for the child to empty
the last of her lungs
and again, omnipresent
at the edges of the lodge,
the wind whistling
in the night leaves,
with the howl and yelp of hyena
and I had shivered and wiped
the fevered brow of the child,
rinsed her in tepid water,
willing the fever to abate,
but, at the doctor’s room,
I watched the doleful shake of a head
and we are ushered to the hospital
for days and drips and bad dreams,
and I remember now,

those cruel and furtive fingers,
clutching at us as we headed home,
to await that final call –
he had tied a gnarled knot,
climbed a crooked stool
and stepped to his freedom –
and I had, instinctively,
reached for the child and
was surprised to find her
cool to the touch,
serenely sleeping,
and I sat still,
in silence.

If only you said

no, to the fast rolling dice
on fake green veld,
to the red and black squares
on a spinning wheel,
to the neon lights spiralling
in blackness on a bright
sun-yellow day.

If only you walked,
Jesus-like, on water,
fed loaves,
not to the world,
but to us,
healed, with sky-blue eyes piercing,
not only your body,
but also your mind.

If only you said
no, to pills in packets hidden,
to casual experiments with
ropes wrought in knots,
to the differing heights of

chairs and stools,
to plots of derelict land,
harbouring abandoned garages.

If only you said
no, knowing you could walk away,
in your rumpled shirt,
hair flecked grey and white,
brown shoes time-burnished,
to open loving arms
that would catch all of you.

Although I recognise now that “confessionalism” was embraced successfully in the 1950s and 1960s by poets such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and, one of my favourites, John Berryman, my own form of confessional poetry required development. I was guilty of “pointing” the reader to my themes, and often did not follow the maxim “show don’t tell”. Essentially, I had no understanding of the notion of the objective correlative.

T S Eliot’s doctrine of the objective correlative is expounded in his essay on Hamlet titled “Hamlet and His Problems”. This is one of the poems in his collection *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, where Eliot famously describes Hamlet as “most certainly an artistic failure” (1934: 98). According to Eliot, Hamlet’s strong emotions were not supported by an objective correlative. Eliot used the term objective correlative to refer to an artistic mechanism whereby the poet is able to invoke emotion in the reader. He writes:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (Eliot, 1934: 100).

This doctrine of the objective correlative is often referred to as one of “poetic impersonality”. Through a sustained journey of reading and reflection, I began to understand that there was a different and more powerful way to unleash

emotion in my poems. By gaining an understanding of the objective correlative, I realised that the action of creating an emotion through external factors would assist me in producing a detachment that was previously lacking in my poetry. Through the use of my owl motif, I have been able to achieve a level of impersonal detachment that has, in my view, elevated my writing.

10.4.4 The influence of the concepts canvassed in my essay on my poetry

The inspiration for my owl motif came in an almost fateful way. For the purposes of my MA, I attended Imraan Coovadia's course on creative writing. During a particular workshop, Imraan, after reading my pieces, asked whether I had read Ted Hughes's *Life and Songs of the Crow*. Two days later, while wandering through the shelves of a second-hand bookstore, I came across a copy of this book. To say that the poems gripped me would be an understatement. I was completely in their grasp. The crow haunted me at night, pursued me in the day. The pain, anguish and despair of the poems thumped a metronome in my ears. I resolved to attempt to create a portfolio that, while acknowledging the pain of living in this world, would evoke the opposite of the despair and anguish imbued in Hughes's crow poems. It was then that I began to write the owl poems.

In the body of my essay, I have made reference to Harold Bloom's text *The Anatomy of Influence*, wherein Bloom devotes an entire chapter to the notion of "sublime strangeness". As I mentioned, this notion is essentially a reworking of the concept of making strange that was expounded by the Russian Formalists in the early 1930s. The Formalists' notion and Bloom's more modern formulation resonated with me. I have made an attempt to incorporate this element of sublime strangeness in my poems.

Inspiration for my poetry has also come from a reading of the works of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and psychologists such as Carl Gustav Jung. Many of my poems attach themselves to ideas or concepts expounded by these authors and try to present the ideas in a new and fresh light. The poems also conceal a dense, deeper hidden truth. This aspect of concealment, with revelation coming only if one takes the time to consider the pieces in more depth, is bound up in the conceal/reveal milieu in which I grew up.

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