

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SOWETO POETRY:

DILEMMAS IN AN EMERGENT LITERATURE

MICHAEL ANTHONY KARASSELLOS

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SOWETO POETRY:  
DILEMMAS IN AN EMERGENT LITERATURE

by

Michael Anthony Karassellos

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts (Literary Studies)  
Department of English  
University of Cape Town

April 1989

Supervisor : Mr.S.Watson

## ABSTRACT

A review of contemporary South African and European critical approaches to "Soweto poetry" is undertaken to evaluate their efficacy in addressing the diverse and complex dynamics evident in the poetry. A wide selection of poetry from the 1970's and early 1980's is used to argue that none of the critical models provide an adequate methodology free from both pseudo-cultural or ideological assumptions, and "reader-grid" (imposition of external categories upon the poems). From this point of entry, three groups of critics with similar approaches are assessed in relation to Soweto poetry.

The second chapter illustrates the deficiency in critical methodology of the first group of critics, who rely on a politicizing approach. Their critique presupposes a coherent shift in the nature of Black Consciousness poetry in the 1970's, which is shown to be vague and problematic, especially when they attempt to categorize Soweto poetry into "consistently thematic" divisions.

In the third chapter it is argued that ideological approaches to Soweto poetry are impressionistic assessments that depend heavily on the subordination of aesthetic determinants to materialistic concerns. The critics in this second group draw a dubious distinction between bourgeois and "worker poetry" and ignore the interplay between the two styles. Pluralized mergings within other epistemological spectrums are also ignored, showing an obsessive materialist bias.

The fourth chapter examines the linguistic approach of the third group of critics. It is argued that they evaluate the poetry in terms of a defined critical terminology which assumes an established set of evaluative criteria exist. This is seen to be empiricist and deficient in wider social concerns.

In the final chapter it is submitted that each of the critical approaches examined foregrounds its own methodology, often ignoring the cohabitation of different systems of thought. In conclusion it is argued that a critical approach can only aspire to the formulation of a "black aesthetic" if it traces the mosaic of cultural borrowings, detours and connections that permeate Soweto poetry. Michel Serres, with his post-deconstructionist "approach", is presented as the closest aspirant.

There is a danger,...that all black protest poetry will be lumped together in one undifferentiated mass. It seems of dubious value if "protest poetry" is allowed to become a catch-all catchphrase which, in reality, covers poems which conceal very different ideologies. Research should take careful note of historical developments of black opposition institutions and ideologies. Black protest poetry, in other words, must be seen to reflect differing ideologies and differing interests just as the black political movements did - often contemporaneously.

Tim Couzens

Africa Perspective

## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	v
1. INTRODUCTION	1
What is Soweto Poetry?	
I Critical Dilemmas	3
II Critical Approaches to Soweto Poetry	4
The Politicizing Approach	
III The Ideological Approach	8
IV The Linguistic Approach	11
V Critical Evaluation and Method	15
2. THE POLITICIZING APPROACH	25
I Black Consciousness and Soweto Poetry	25
II Consistency and cultural borrowing	37
III The "shift" in Soweto Poetry	46
IV Problems of categorization	50
3. THE IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH	63
I Materialist vs Aesthetic	63
II Petit-bourgeois and Worker poetry	70
III Stylistic and Ideological interplay	77
4. THE LINGUISTIC APPROACH	85
I Western evaluative criteria	85
II Adapting the model	93
III Which critical tools ?	98
5. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND METHOD	109
Conclusion	
<u>Bibliography</u>	117
Appendix(Poems)	124

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my supervisor Mr. Stephen Watson, who offered me guidance and assistance, I wish to express my sincere thanks.

My appreciation also goes to the staff of the U.C.T. library, for their willingness and efficiency in obtaining the material for this study.

I wish to thank my wife, who typed this manuscript, and my parents for their encouragement.

Finally, the financial assistance of the Institute for Research Development of the Human Sciences Research Council is gratefully acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this dissertation and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Institute for Research Development or the Human Sciences Research Council.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After Sharpeville (March 1960) and the bannings of the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress<sup>1</sup>, there was a need for black political direction and a new ideological framework, as all significant black leaders were jailed, banned or exiled. Whites could then no longer be accepted for their traditional rôle, as benevolent patriarchs in black politics, for they had not shown any radical change with regard to the unjust societal structures of their own making. Apartheid laws<sup>2</sup> which forced blacks to work and live in specific "homelands", education policies which favoured the white student, and the necessity for blacks to carry "pass books", were just a few of these unjust structures. The A.N.C. and P.A.C. bannings created a vacuum<sup>3</sup> where virtually all channels for anti-apartheid expression were closed. Because of this situation the poetry which was written around this time was termed "Post-Sharpeville poetry" - the forerunner to "Soweto poetry" - and was seen as a Black Consciousness response to the conditions under which black people were living.

No one seemed to ask to what extent Black Consciousness actually informed the poetry - it was just accepted that black poetry after Sharpeville simply must reflect dehumanization. This opinion owed its formulation to a number of black associations<sup>4</sup>, who were instrumental in preaching and popularizing the philosophy of Black Consciousness. It was not surprising, therefore, that after the Soweto riots of 16th June 1976, all black South African poetry should some-

how be lumped together as a coherent body of protest poetry - an "uncompromising poetry of resistance",<sup>5</sup> as Michael Chapman calls it. The poets who had been writing about Soweto township life - Mtshali, Serote, Gwala, Motsisi and Ndebele - were now the "official" Soweto poets, owing to their associations with the place of unrest. Complications set in, however, when black writers with no association whatever with Soweto, began writing poetry with some of the same thematic concerns as the Soweto poets. Even white, Indian and coloured poets joined forces in the "language of the oppressed", until "Soweto poetry" became the banner under which all poets wrote about the injustices that addressed South African social realities. Such is the history of the term Soweto poetry.

Today Soweto poetry is no more clearly defined than in its turbulent history. It remains a vague construct which critics use to categorize poets and their work into neat packages with labels such as "apocalyptic". As a result, this dissertation will draw upon a wide range of black, white, Indian and coloured poets who wrote in the 1970's and early 1980's - the period in which Soweto poetry is said to have "emerged". It will be argued that the poetry in this period is so diverse and culturally enriched that it is difficult - at times impossible - to trace a coherent and consistent Black Consciousness link. Even the term "Black Consciousness" is a poorly defined construct, and when incorporated into a poetry that has a cauldron of influences, the result can only be a critic's nightmare. The dilemmas in any critical approach to Soweto poetry remain multifaceted and self-perpetuating as long as critics attempt to force limiting methodologies on

black poets who themselves have dilemmas.

## I

### Critical Dilemmas

The search for adequate critical tools with which to assess the diverse body of Soweto poetry (also termed the "New Black poetry", "Township poetry", "Participatory poetry", "Post-Sharpeville poetry", and "People's poetry") has so far proved fruitless. Critics remain divided as to what a "black aesthetic" really consists of, although scapegoats in the form of Black Consciousness and Marxist-Leninist ideology or "conditions of class", are continually offered as truly evaluative criteria.

The complex dynamics or interplay in the poetry itself are often ignored or shaded over by these obsessive politicizing or ideological approaches. For instance, Soweto poets are usually depicted as an undifferentiated mass, when in fact they vary considerably in background and style of composition. Their poetry, as will be shown shortly, combines a myriad of cultural borrowings, detours and connections and cannot merely be labelled "Black Consciousness", "Protest poetry" or "Petit-Bourgeois poetry".

This culturally enriched medium in Soweto poetry consequently challenges any application of formal or empiricist linguistic approaches, which obviously depend on accepted categories of

what is absolute and universal in poetry, for a value judgement.

It may thus be established that there are three major approaches used by critics of Soweto poetry:

1. the politicizing approach.
2. the ideological approach.
3. the linguistic approach.

Within these approaches are manifestations and overlaps; for example, the politicizing approach presupposes that Black Consciousness informs all of the poetry; that there is a coherent body of Soweto poetry which is free from "imported models"; that a "shift" in the thematic concerns of the poetry is clearly discernible; and that each shift makes an autonomous category within Soweto poetry (such as "resistance" or "apocalyptic" poetry). These major critical approaches or models are thus not rigidly defined, and it should be stressed that the critics often combine, adapt or reject one or more models in presenting their critique. As a result, critics being grouped in the dissertation under a specific approach, only implies that their predominant methodology shares common ground with the other critics in that particular category or approach - no two approaches are identical. It will now be necessary to briefly elucidate the three approaches.

## II

### Critical Approaches to Soweto Poetry

The politicizing approach is examined in chapter two and illustrates how Michael Chapman, Colin Gardner, Ursula Barnett and Charles Malan presuppose that a poetry renaiss-

ance took place around the time of the Soweto riots in 1976. This "renaissance", they argue, involved a shift in the poetry's emphasis from a passive expression of Black Consciousness, to a dominant position of resistance after a given period. The critical approach is thus to see the poetry after 1976 as politically oriented. This clearly defined "shift" cannot be proved to be consistent, however, although writers such as Mafika Gwala argue that Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum and Serote's Yakhal'inkomo point to a clear demarcation.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a poetry renaissance is also disputed because of the obvious difficulties involved in motivating a number of black poets to begin writing "resistance" poetry. As Nadine Gordimer observes:

One cannot simply "turn" to poetry. It is simply not there, available to anybody with a few hours of home study to spare, like a correspondence course in accountancy or learning to play the recorder... Poetry as a last resort is indeed a strange concept; and a kind of inversion of the enormous problems of skill and gifts implied in electing to write poetry at all.<sup>8</sup>

Alvarez-Peryre is one of the critics in this first group who disregards the absurdity of a poetry renaissance; for instance, he argues that Matthews "was essentially a short-story writer, turned to poetry at a moment when it seemed more effective than prose as the vehicle of protest."<sup>9</sup>

It should be emphasized at this point that a distinct and central weakness in the politicizing approach, is the tendency to relate poetry to politics in such a way that poets "emerge" at times of political upheaval. For example, Mzamane says of

Kgositsile that he is the "most radical of the poets to have emerged in the sixties, perhaps only rivalled by the new crop of poets who emerged after the Soweto uprisings."<sup>10</sup> This criticism is weak, because it foregrounds the poetry after a political event as being entirely conditioned by that event. It thus ignores the fact that black protest writing has been written throughout the history of South Africa - Mphahlele<sup>11</sup> traces black protest writing to the Act of Union in 1909, but it has been found that blacks were articulating their grievances against a colonial legislature as far back as 1884.<sup>12</sup> Politicizing criticism should, therefore, be wary of distinguishing periods of politically inspired poetry. Indeed, Stephen Gray in his book Southern African Literature: An Introduction, warns that "Southern African literature cannot be divided into periods with much success. Such periods are arbitrary and open-ended, and will remain so until further research reveals the contours of the whole more clearly."<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the politicizing approach relies on a clear indication of Black Consciousness in Soweto poetry, is another problem which will be addressed in chapter 2. Mtshali's poems will be assessed for their Black Consciousness content and shown to vary considerably in consistency. Ironically, the one element the politicizing approach holds onto as a constant, is the one most liable to change. This is a prevalent dilemma in black writing further afield. Irele, for instance, points out that there is evidently a "tending towards the transposition of an old scale of feelings and attitudes into a new key of expression "<sup>14</sup>, but doesn't add that there are many "shades" within this "new key of expression" or

consciousness. Theorists, such as Henri Bergson, argue convincingly that there are no "clean-cut states" in consciousness, which arrange themselves side by side, but rather a continuity which unfolds.<sup>15</sup> Thus when Alvarez-Pereyre observes that there is "a close correspondence between the ideals of Black Consciousness...and those expressed by the poets studied in the last chapter [Mtshali, Serote, Mattera, Matthews, Gwala and Sepamla]" and that "never before has there been such complete identification between the mentality of a whole generation and the poetry it writes"<sup>16</sup>, he fails to discern that Black Consciousness necessarily adjusts and assimilates diverse cultural elements in its development.

The tendency to blindly accept that a defined and static Black Consciousness informs the poetry, is therefore a common weakness in the politicizing approach - a weakness that Cronin feels, results if both Black Consciousness and black poetry are not "located in time and place".<sup>17</sup> Even the Soweto poets themselves were to be ultimately disillusioned by its elusive rhetoric: "Black Consciousness", says Mafika Gwala, "was not an end in itself, since it was subject to the direction national consciousness would follow. Right through the hectic days it has remained an identity divided against itself...Right now one can unreservedly claim that there is nothing to be gained for blacks continuing to mythify Black Consciousness."<sup>18</sup>

To attempt a division of Soweto poetry into easily manageable components in autonomous categories is the downfall of the

politicizing approach. This group of critics, together with Heywood and Lennox-Short, fail to reach any formulation of a black aesthetic - they ignore the "cultural borrowings, detours and connections", which Michel Serres proves the existence of, in every work of art. This yardstick, which is discussed in both the conclusion to the introduction and in chapter 5, will be the theoretical framework against which all three critical approaches will be measured. It can thus be seen that there are manifestations and overlaps within the politicizing approach, which come into being because the critics adhering to this approach assume that: Black Consciousness informs all the poetry; a coherent body of Soweto poetry exists and is "free from imported models"; that a shift is clearly discernible in the thematic concerns of the poetry; and that each shift makes up an autonomous category. For this reason, chapter 2 will be divided into four parts, each part both surveying similar critical approaches, and illustrating their deficiency by applying them to Soweto poems. The four parts of chapter 2 are entitled:

1. Black Consciousness and Soweto poetry.
2. Consistency and cultural borrowing.
3. The "shift" in Soweto poetry.
4. Problems of categorization.

### III

In the third chapter, the ideological approach to Soweto poetry is discussed. The central limitation of this approach, it will be argued, is the impressionistic application of a "reading grid", which emphasizes the concerns of the ideological reading at the expense of aesthetic considerations,

such as the creative impulse of the poetry. The "reading grid" approach may be likened to a cry or scream one hears at night: is it the playful scream of young lovers chasing one another in the house next door? Is it a scream of delight at hearing good news? Is it the scream of terror at beholding an armed intruder, or the unconscious scream of someone having a nightmare? The human brain imposes a grid and allows all these possibilities to pass through. The one that is caught does not, of course, necessarily reflect the true nature of the scream. What complicates the matter further is that someone in the same room, hearing the scream at the same time, could easily form a completely different interpretation of the sound. Such are the problems facing the critic who attempts to impose an impressionistic western reading grid on a diverse and culturally enriched text; Soweto poetry will ultimately challenge any western closure. In fact Soweto poetry, like Africa itself, challenges any formulation of a coherent black aesthetic - a point which finds expression in the epigraph to Shades of Adamastor:

You are not a country, Africa  
 You are a concept,  
 Fashioned in our minds, each to each <sup>19</sup>

Emphasizing materialistic concerns in the poetry and using these as evaluative criteria, is the methodology employed in the ideological approach. This approach relies on absolutes and generalizations about how and why black South African poetry was written. The theory implies that there is a consistent socio-economic thread which provides blacks with two distinct images of themselves: members of a petty-bourgeoisie or

workers. However, it ignores the controversy implicit in the idea of a coherent identity or image. Nkosi's review of Mphahlele's The African Image, rejects this idea of any generalized or absolute "image": "This book [The African Image] reveals ironically and sometimes painfully, the bottomless confusion which now attends the efforts by African intellectuals to re-create an image of themselves from the disparate elements of their cultures as well as from the debris of their shattered pre-colonial past. For if anything emerges it is not a single coherent image of Africans or a clear projection of who Africans really are; rather it is an affirmation by the author...that such an image has been fragmented beyond recognition."<sup>20</sup>

The ideological approach thus depends on a politically informed black group of poets who can articulate the concerns of a black "worker" community without showing a petty-bourgeois or intellectual bias. This will be proved fatuous, for the sense of Black Consciousness it relies on is "amorphous and diffuse ...leading to vagueness in the definition of its programmes."<sup>21</sup> The Soweto poets, moreover, do not share the same political background and ideology; nor do they write within a worker or petit-bourgeois continuum, although it is argued that their poetry can be seen rather as an interplay between these and other epistemological spectrums. This interplay is ignored by an ideological approach, in favour of foregrounding ideological universality. Couzens, however, points out the dubious claim of any "ideologically consistent" or "class" poetry, by illustrating how Peter Abrahams' poems repeatedly change or modify their political philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

The critics who take an ideological approach to Soweto poetry are Peter Horn, Kelwyn Sole, and Michael Vaughan. The ideological reading grid they apply ranges from a Sociological (neo-Marxist) model to a Marxist-Leninist model, but all share established distinctions between petit-bourgeois and worker poetry, favouring the latter as a critical model by which to assess the bourgeois poetry. This ideologically selective approach thus emphasizes : materialist concerns at the expense of aesthetic considerations; critical distinctions between bourgeois and worker poetry; and universality in preference to stylistic and epistemological interplay. These three models will constitute the basis of chapter 3's critique, together with the poetry of Gwala and Serote. The three parts of chapter 3 are entitled:

1. Materialist vs Aesthetic.
2. Petit-bourgeois and Worker poetry.
3. Stylistic and Ideological interplay.

#### IV

The dilemmas encountered in the linguistic critical approach - of Nadine Gordimer, Douglas Livingstone, Jeremy Cronin, Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre and A.S. van Niekerk - are discussed in chapter 4. These dilemmas become apparent when any attempt is made to qualitatively unravel or evaluate the mosaic of perplexingly entangled assimilations in Soweto poetry. Such difficulties are usually sidestepped, however; for example, André Brink and John Coetzee in their compilation of A Land Apart state that they:

have not set out to define, isolate and excerpt  
the best that has been written in the past

decade, doubting whether there is any generally acceptable standard of absolute literary excellence by which writers of various ambitions, working in diverse genres, addressing themselves to different audiences, in a time of acute ideological tension and political polarization, can be judged<sup>23</sup>

Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre is another critic who feels that aesthetic considerations of value are inapplicable in South Africa. He uses the poetry of James Matthews to argue, like Borwicz,<sup>24</sup> that one cannot judge the poetry of condemned or deported men according to the criteria for judging traditional poetry. Alvarez-Pereyre feels that "to lay down criteria of literary worth in an oppressed society would be to reduce poetry to a simple exercise, which is something totally incompatible with the revolutionary poetry with which Matthews has much in common..."<sup>25</sup> Black critics and poets such as Mbulelo Mzamane and Oswald Mtshali also share the above views. Mzamane, for instance, says that "F.R. Leavis' way, even in English literature, is not the only critical method. A category for Africa's committed literature must be made to which we may not apply purely western standards, just as we may not apply these to, say, an assessment of Chinese Literature."<sup>26</sup> The central dilemma facing the linguistic critical approach thus consists in deciding between seeking a new critical standpoint, or falling back on the literary culture which informs the use of the English language in Soweto poetry.

The above dilemma is succinctly expressed in the posing of three questions by Sol Chaphole, in his essay "Critical

Standards For African Literature":

i. Do we continue to employ Western standards as if nothing has happened?

OR

ii. Do we develop brand new African standards to handle the new literature that clearly shows influences of both traditions?

OR

iii. Do we modify existing critical procedures in order to make honest, informed judgements ...bearing in mind that what functions as criticism for one literature may not necessarily function for another. After all, T.S.Eliot reminds us that every nation, every race, has not only its own creative but its own critical turn of mind. <sup>27</sup>

These questions will be addressed when examining the poetry itself, and so it will suffice to briefly touch upon their issues here.

The first question deals with the dilemma of whether to impose an established western critical heritage, such as the "Great Tradition", upon Soweto poetry. If such a tradition were applied it may be assumed that much of the poetry, which tries to "break free" from the ruling white discourse by inverting or abandoning basic poetic techniques, would be found technically deficient. This opinion is shared by Gordimer and Livingstone, although Matthews makes a case for the protest poets, implying that the social context of his work must take precedence over aesthetic considerations:

To label my utterings poetry  
and myself a poet  
would be as self-deluding

as the planners of parallel development.

I record the anguish of the persecuted...<sup>28</sup>

This poem expresses the central criticism of an empiricist linguistic approach; namely, that such an approach deviates away from a social critical analysis<sup>29</sup> and defuses the Soweto poet's dominant themes.

This leads to the issues involved in Chaphole's second question - whether new critical tools are necessary to evaluate the new poetry. If new tools are not found, an empiricist linguistic approach will obviously question whether politics and verse can mix, and be part of a cultural struggle, to the detriment of creativity.

Finally, Chaphole's third question, regarding the modification of existing critical tools, brings us back full circle to the dilemma of interpreting the elusive black aesthetic. If existing western critical tools are to be modified, they must necessarily be modified around something of more substance. In other words, a black aesthetic must be defined - a task which even black critics themselves shy away from:

on the whole black South African critics writing in South Africa, while wholeheartedly supporting writing which is socially and politically relevant to the black man's life, are cautious in their attitude towards a black aesthetic which they feel still needs definition and must grow out of the literature itself.<sup>30</sup>

Chaphole's three questions will provide the points of entry into the linguistic approaches of chapter 4, which will consist of three parts:

1. Western evaluative criteria.
2. Adapting the model.
3. Which critical tools?

## V

## Critical Evaluation and Method

It can be seen, from this brief survey of critical approaches to Soweto poetry, that any South African critic has a formidable task in trying to find adequate tools or critical models with which to attempt a coherent methodology for the poetry. Most models are deficient and inadequate in addressing the diverse amalgam of influences and assimilations in the poetry. A common deficiency of the approaches, is to foreground their own methodology and subsequently overlook the possibility of there being cohabitations of differing ideologies, styles and backgrounds. A conference held at York in 1981, for instance, attempted to map the ground of some of the directions being taken in the study of South African literature. The conference "grew out of a sense of dissatisfaction with the current state of Southern African literary studies. In particular, this dissatisfaction focussed upon the lack of connection between literary studies and other, potentially intercontributory, disciplines."<sup>31</sup> The York conference, however, reached no agreement, although models such as "functionalist", "structural", "structural functionalist", "traditional-modern", "power relations in the social and historical context", "racial populism" and "class analysis",<sup>32</sup> were offered as evaluative criteria.

This wide diversity of perspectives and critical models is summed up by Vaughan, when he says that "if contributions to this moment of contact were to a large extent heterogeneous and uncoordinated...this must be seen as a reflection of the difficulty, in South Africa, of developing a common critical

project."<sup>33</sup> This is indeed the case ; poetry conferences can only lead to heated debates - as Richard Rive, in his book Writing Black observes:

In 1974...a poetry conference was held at the University of Cape Town as part of its Summer School programme. Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and James Matthews were amongst those invited. Discussions became very heated, with the Whites split into two opposing camps. The established poets who received the brunt of criticism were represented by Guy Butler and Syd Clouts. The younger more impatient writers who were doing the attacking were poets such as Christopher Hope and Mike Kirkwood. The Blacks watched from the sidelines.<sup>34</sup>

Soweto poetry thus presents itself as extremely difficult to define, as does a comprehensive literary history of South African writing itself.<sup>35</sup> Any attempt at isolating or closing off one particular strand of expression is fraught with pitfalls. There is the danger of imposing arbitrarily rigid limits and confines, within populist, radical materialist or modernist approaches, which ultimately steer away from a comprehensive definition. Rive, on the other hand, says there can never be a definition - he argues that attempts to find distinct common ground loses itself in the synthesis of experience whose "boundaries" are greater than merely the continents of Africa and Europe.<sup>36</sup>

An example of the synthesis in Soweto poetry, as pointed out previously, is the diverse cultural mix. In his essay "Dilemmas in Black Poetry", Ulliyat voices the frustration of attempting to categorize "black poets":

I do not know who the black poets of South Africa really are. By the phrase, "black poets", do we mean

only black African poets? If so, how are we to classify the work of black Indian poets? And where are we going to place Adam Small and Arthur Nortje? By "black poets" do we mean all those who are not white? And what about poets whose skin is white but whose life has been spent entirely in Africa?<sup>37</sup>

When this cultural mix is combined with the vague notion of Black Consciousness there is critical pandemonium, for the founder of the Black Consciousness movement (Steve Biko) stated clearly that the breakaway from NUSAS meant total white exclusion. He argued that no white liberal could identify with an oppressed group "in a system that forces one group to enjoy privilege and to live on the sweat of another."<sup>38</sup> How then can poets of mixed blood be accepted as Soweto poets? This question is best answered by Couzens when he observes that:

"Black Consciousness" is not an hereditary psychological state. There are blacks who are so Western, so élitist, so bourgeois, that they are far more "white" than many whites. Used in this way the colour terminology is a metaphor, not a straightforward statement. For the corollary is absurd: "How can a white man understand black writing?" is rendered ridiculous if one asks: "How can a black man understand Shakespeare?"<sup>39</sup>

What emerges, therefore, is a complex mixture of cultural influences, traditions and ideologies - there is no "pure black" poetry. Attempts to deny the multifarious cultural influences can only be regressive. What is needed rather, is to trace the mosaic of cultural borrowings, detours and connections that permeate Soweto poetry. To avoid this would be to accept the fatuous argument that Soweto poetry has "forged a literary sensibility self-assertively and excitingly free from any imported models."<sup>40</sup>

Diverse cultural influences cannot be ignored in black literature - a point emphatically stressed by Rive. "It would be ridiculous for me to deny the influence of Plomer and Bosman as it would be to deny the existence of my white and black forefathers."<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, presumptuous historicization and politicization also fail, for they rely on the simple and worn-out formula: black dissatisfaction + increased white oppression = Black Consciousness poetry. Furthermore, generalized categorization, such as "Township poetry", is not only patronizing<sup>42</sup>, but it could lead to a greater polarization between Western and Soweto or "African" art. J.M.Coetzee believes it is a self-defeating process to name "Africa by defining it as non-Europe - self-defeating because in each particular in which Africa is identified to be non-European, it remains Europe, not Africa, that is named... the real Africa will always slip through the net woven by European categories."<sup>43</sup>

It is indeed time that critics reassessed the yardsticks they use to evaluate Soweto poetry, and seek for a way in which the whole range of complicated and confused dynamics can be articulated. Such a "method", it will be argued, is that of Michel Serres, whose approach the dissertation will use in its examination of both Soweto poems and critical approaches to them. It should be noted, however, that the dissertation does not engage in a polemic against other critical approaches, and Serres is never offered as merely an alternative methodology. In fact, Serres would deny having any "critical position" (although he is sometimes called a post-deconstructionist), for his work refutes the idea that there are "positions" or "boundaries"

between one discipline and another.

In brief, Serres believes that language and literature are like a palimpsest, with the original word remaining after the new ink. We must therefore endeavour, he feels, to intercept the new influences on the original utterance or word. In this way aesthetics are not subordinated to one particular system of thought, or epistemology - they pervade all man-made intellectual constructions. For example, if Serres were faced with a poem he would not label it "surrealist" or "protest" poetry, but would call into question the system of knowledge which gave rise to such a category in the first place. For Serres, therefore, there are no universal critical models,<sup>44</sup> as these are only operable if they exclude other models. Consequently, if a model chooses its own distinct set of coordinates and pre-suppositions, it is rejected by Serres.

The best example of Serres' critical thought is his wide ranging analysis of La Fontaine's poem The Wolf and the Lamb. Instead of categorizing it or giving it any set boundaries, he "explodes" the text. As he says, "one must resolutely open a new epistemological spectrum and read the colors that our prejudices had previously erased...each province is a world and has its world so that epistemology (which is dead as long as it remains outside) becomes pluralized and relativized, within the system."<sup>45</sup> In the above poem, Serres illustrates how, instead of one model, there are several - biological, ethical, spatial, rational, physical, political, temporal, genealogical and social models<sup>46</sup> - which are continually and simultaneously displacing one another.

Soweto poetry is also mediated by a number of social, economic, political and historical factors. Critics should thus be wary of "classifying" poetry, for a poem simply depicting township life may, after a political riot, be reclassified protest poetry, or Black Consciousness poetry. It should always be remembered, as Serres stresses, that the new influences, which have shaped the interpretation of the original utterance, must be intercepted and evaluated. One cannot simply say, for example, that "Black Consciousness informs the poetry of the seventies"; one must rather ask: "where does it inform the poetry; how does it inform; what critical tools have I used to assess the Black Consciousness influences?"

If Serres were faced with politicizing, ideological and linguistic approaches to Soweto poetry, it may be concluded that he would obviously question their efficacy in addressing the whole range of diverse and complex dynamics within the poems. This would be done by establishing whether:

1. the methodology favoured a specific ideology or system of thought, which did not address the possibility that cohabitations of different systems of thought might exist within the poetry.
2. the methodology imposed external categories, assumptions or reading grids upon the text, thereby minimizing, or even ignoring altogether, the cultural assimilations and adaptations inherent in Soweto poetry.

It is around these two crucial distinctions that the dissertation centres its evaluation of Soweto poetry and the critical approaches thereto.

## NOTES

1. Introduction

1. E. Roux Time longer than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa, pp. 406-411.
2. See, for instance, A. Lemon Apartheid in Transition, pp. 197-293, for an overview of migrant labour practices in South Africa.
3. As P. Horn points out in his essay "When It Rains It Rains" in Speak Vol. 1 No. 5 1978 p. 7. See also Mafika Gwala "Writing As A Cultural Weapon" in M. J. Daymond et al (eds) Momentum: On Recent South African Writing, p. 38.
4. Such as "The South African Student Organization" (SASO); the "South African Students' Movement" (SASM) - for the spread of Black Consciousness in schools; the "Music, Drama Art and Literature Institute" (MDALI); and the "Soweto Students Representative Council" (SSRC). These associations were subsequently banned on 19th October, 1977. See also A. De Crespigny & R. Schrire (eds) The Government and Politics of South Africa, p. 122.
5. M. Chapman Soweto Poetry p. 12.
6. *ibid* p. 19.
7. Mafika Gwala "Writing As A Cultural Weapon" in M. J. Daymond et al (eds) *op cit* p. 38.
8. Nadine Gordimer The Black Interpreters, p. 53 (my emphasis).
9. J. Alvarez-Pereyre The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa p. 207.
10. Mbulelo Mzamane "Literature and Politics Among Blacks in South Africa" in New Classic No. 5, 1978, p. 53.
11. E. Mphahlele The African Image pp. 167-169. See M. Mzamane *ibid* for a more comprehensive history of black protest literature.

- 12.P.Walshe The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa p.3. See also Andre Odendaal's Vukani Bantu! The beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912, which draws attention to the fact that there was always a quest for a uniquely Black Consciousness in South African politics.
- 13.Stephen Gray Southern African Literature: An Introduction p.13.
- 14.A.Irele "The Criticisms of Modern African Literature" in C.Heywood(ed) Perspectives on African Literature p.17.
- 15.Henri Bergson "Duration" in Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson Jr.(eds) The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature p.724.
- 16.J.Alvarez-Pereyre op cit p.242.
- 17.Although a definition was attempted in SASO Newsletter, vol. 5,no.3,November 1975: a copy of which is quoted in ibid p.48n.
- 18.J.Cronin in Susan Gardner(ed) Four South African Poets p.26.
- 19.M.van Wyk Smith Shades of Adamastor - Epigraph.
- 20.L.Nkosi Home And Exile And Other Selections,p.129.
- 21.As Kelywyn Sole admits in "Culture,Politics and the Black Writer:A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions" in English In Africa Vol,10 No.1 May 1983 p.58.
- 22.Tim Couzens "Politics and Black Poetry in South Africa 1930-1950" in Africa Perspective no.7, April 1978 pp.2-14.
- 23.A.Brink and J.M.Coetzee(eds) A Land Apart p.8.
- 24.J.Alvarez-Pereyre op cit p.215.
- 25.ibid p.215.
- 26.M.Mzamane quoted in U.Barnett A Vision of Order:A Study of Black South African Literature in English(1914-1980) p.266.See also Mtshali's views on aesthetic value in

- M.Chapman op cit p.110.
- 27.Sol Chaphole "Critical Standards for African Literature" in The English Academy Review vol.2 1984 p.106.
- 28.From James Matthews' Cry Rage!
- 29.Colin Gardner poses these hypothetical linguistic questions in "Poetry And/Or Politics:Recent South African Black Verse" in English In Africa vol.9,I,May 1982 p.48
- 30.U.Barnett op cit p.267
- 31.Michael Vaughan "Ideological Directions in the Study of Southern African Literature" in English In Africa vol.9,2 Oct 1982 p.42.
- 32.ibid pp.45-62.
- 33.ibid p.63.
- 34.Richard Rive Writing Black p.148.
- 35.As Abrahams points out in his essay "A Stubborn Case: Problems in developing a South African Literary History" in Dieter Riemenschneider(ed) The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature pp.136,142. See also Mafika Gwala in M.J.Daymond et al(eds) op cit p.45,where he says that poetry in South Africa is"so wide - complex, and many-angled," that a defined literary history and style is a myth.
- 36.R.Rive Selected Writings p.72.
- 37.A.G.Ullyatt "Dilemmas in Black poetry" in Contrast vol.11 no.4 Dec 1977 p.61.
- 38.S.Biko I Write What I Like p.66. Biko felt that blacks "want to do things for themselves and all by themselves": quoted in G.M.Gerhart Black Power in South Africa:The Evolution of an Ideology p.262.

- 39.T.Couzens "Black Poetry in Africa" in J.A.Polley and P.Wilhelm(eds) Poetry South Africa:Selected Papers From Poetry '74 p.58.
- 40.M.Chapman op cit p.19.
- 41.R.Rive Selected Writings p.70.
- 42.In O.Mtshali , "Black Poetry in Southern Africa:What it means",in C.Heywood(ed) Aspects of South African Literature p.122, he says that "Township Art" is a tag that has been attached to black poets which "smacks of patronizing, if not downright contempt."
- 43.J.M.Coetzee White Writing pp.164-167.
- 44.J.V.Harari and D.F.Bell(eds) Hermes:Literature,Science, Philosophy p.xiv.
- 45.ibid p.xiv (my emphasis).
- 46.ibid p.19.

## 2. THE POLITICIZING APPROACH

### I

#### Black Consciousness and Soweto poetry

The politicizing approach never takes cognizance of the fact that Black Consciousness was never a coherent movement in the history of black South Africans. Even Steve Biko, its founder and president of the Black People's Convention (B.P.C.), could not provide an accurate definition of it. When asked during his trial about the Black Consciousness movement, as enshrined in the B.P.C., Biko stressed that a "philosophy is never complete over two or three months or two years. Some philosophies take twenty years to perfect, before it can be a fortified body of thought."<sup>1</sup> The multifarious influences in Black Consciousness, with its own conflicting thoughts and feelings, is summed up by Manganyi, when he observes that "Black Consciousness is something about which each person has evidence within himself."<sup>2</sup> Taking his impetus from this statement, Philip Frankel, of the University of the Witwatersrand, conducted a random survey of one hundred black people in Soweto and found that - to the question "What do the words Black Consciousness mean to you?" - 17 answered that the term had positive political connotations to them; 44 answered that they assigned cultural connotations to the term; 25 answered that they were against the use of the term; 9 were incapable of responding in any fashion, and 5 were undecided.<sup>3</sup> His obvious conclusion was that there was no consistency of thought or emotion with regard to the term.

There are thus many conflicting opinions on Black Consciousness,

and the definitions of the term are even more problematic; for instance, it has been argued that Black Consciousness is a process of self-identification and a means by which the oppressed can move from passivity to assertiveness or "Black Power".<sup>4</sup> This definition, like any of the other "all-encompassing" attempts at terms or categories, is unsuitable because "Black Power" is a term which is taboo in white South Africa and the use of its prerequisite, "Black Consciousness", has become so broad that it is almost impossible to define. Rallying cries like "Blacks must sing 'Black and Black' together, before they can sing 'Black and white' together",<sup>5</sup> give the impression that Black Consciousness is something attainable at any time the people wish to write. On the other hand, Robert Fatton's Black Consciousness in South Africa, gives the date of the movement's birth as December 1968, with the black breakaway from NUSAS and the formation of the South African Students Organization(SASO)<sup>6</sup>. There is thus a need for a specific economic, political and social context, before any "Black Consciousness" hypothesis can be formulated.

Black Consciousness, therefore, cannot be simply assumed to have informed all Soweto poetry, although its influence is not disputed. Some of the poems that will be discussed, for instance, do show signs of the quest for a lost identity - a lost Africa. As Mokgethi Motlhabi has pointed out, the conditions of apartheid had to be "fought and removed and Black Humanity retrieved ...periodical reawakenings were perhaps essential because prolonged subjugation often creates a tendency of acceptance and resignation, leading to a people's complicity in its own exploitation and dehumanization. As an antidote, Black

Consciousness was aimed at making the Black man 'come to himself'.<sup>7</sup> The most powerful step, in "making the Black man come to himself", ~~occurred~~ in 1972 with a "psychological awareness" programme. SASO had moved into a remarkably strong position and its first expression, of political education and ideological diffusion, was in its politicizing activities with the Black People's Convention (July 1972). This meeting was attended by more than a hundred black, Indian and coloured delegates from all over South Africa. The B.P.C. pledged itself "to preach, popularize and implement the philosophy of Black Consciousness."<sup>8</sup> It is thus possible to establish that a number of poems did popularize this Black Consciousness era, but it would be incorrect to presume that all Soweto poets had this theme in mind. Such is Michael Chapman's presumption.

Chapman - in his introduction to A Century of South African Poetry,<sup>9</sup> in South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective,<sup>10</sup> and in his recently published essay, "Soweto Poetry: Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's"<sup>11</sup> - has argued that the whole of Soweto poetry was a response to Black Consciousness. It will suffice to quote from only one of these works, as they all use the same argument - in fact even the same words:

Soweto poetry began appearing in the mid-1960's mainly in ... The Classic, and has continued to reflect an increasing polarization of the races in South Africa. The work of poets such as Mtshali, James Matthews, Serote and Gwala took its impetus initially from the Black Consciousness ideals of SASO (South African Students Organization) and subsequently from the 1976 Soweto disturbances.<sup>12</sup>

There are a number of problems in this argument, which will

be briefly surveyed before examining the poetry for a consistent Black Consciousness theme. To begin with, Chapman's argument presupposes that poetry can simply appear overnight as a response to a political event. Chapman even goes as far as to say, in the same book, that Soweto poetry was an "immediate response."<sup>13</sup> As pointed out in the introduction, this claim for a type of renaissance is fatuous. If one cannot trace the diverse history of Black Consciousness and protest writing, how is one to ascertain when "the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the decade"<sup>14</sup> took place? Indeed, there is no coherent "common consciousness", as Chapman terms it; nor is there a distinct "movement" in this cauldron of cultural borrowings which he can conveniently group together:

Soweto poetry - which takes its larger unity from a common consciousness of being black (whether African, Indian or coloured)... - may be thought of as a 'movement' of the last decade; and it therefore seemed convenient to group this poetry at the end of the anthology.<sup>15</sup>

Chapman, in his politicizing approach, also disregards the fact that there was protest poetry long before the term "Soweto poetry" was even coined. He is thus incorrect in arguing that the poetry took its impetus initially from Black Consciousness. What about the black South African poetry of 1888, when Citashe wrote:

Your cattle are gone, my countrymen !  
Go rescue them ! Go rescue them !  
Leave the breechloader alone  
And turn to the pen.  
Take paper and ink,  
For that is your shield.  
Your rights are going !

So pick up your pen.  
 Load it, load it with ink  
 Sit on a chair.  
 Repair not to Hoho  
 But fire with your pen.<sup>16</sup>

There is clearly no apparent period in which Soweto poetry and Black Consciousness magically fused together, although this is the central presupposition of the politicizing approach.

Chapman is by no means alone in this view - Colin Gardner, Ursula Barnett and Charles Malan are of the same opinion.

Gardner, for instance, believes that Soweto poetry strongly articulates a "coherent corporate vision"<sup>17</sup>, and that the Staffrider "consciousness" poems may be regarded as "detachable ...part of a package, a part of the Staffrider phenomenon."<sup>18</sup>

Gardner seems to share the opinion of Mzamane, who said that the Soweto poets were specifically dedicated "to the overthrow of the white oppressive and exploitative regime. Their poetry, like the work songs which are actually war songs, is meant to arouse the people, to mobilize the masses and to inspire the would-be liberator."<sup>19</sup>

Barnett, who adopts the politicizing approach, subsequently also accepts that Black Consciousness informs all Soweto poetry. She says of Mtshali, for instance, that he has "succeeded in combining the two main streams that feed black literature in South Africa: black consciousness and struggle for freedom."<sup>20</sup> She then goes on to assume that it was only a small step from this expression of consciousness, or "black awareness", to a militant expression of protest (which she feels became the black aesthetic in South Africa).<sup>21</sup> This point will be discussed in part III of this chapter, where the controversial

"shift" in the emphasis of Soweto poetry is dealt with.

Politicizing criticism, written from a Black Consciousness perspective, thus makes the mistake of foregrounding SASO's breakaway from NUSAS as an "unmistakable watershed"<sup>22</sup> in Soweto poetry. For example, Chapman says that:

On 16 June 1976 the immediate issue of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools sparked off nation-wide riots. Fundamental to the events of both Sharpeville (in 1960) and Soweto was the question of black rights and identity... the idea of Blackness (as it has come to be termed) is the motivating force behind Township poetry, the New Black poetry of the seventies, Participatory, Community or People's poetry, as well as Soweto poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Like Chapman, Malan relies upon the foregrounding of "watershed" dates. He sets aside specific dates in 1950, 1960 and 1976, saying that it was in 1950 that writers "developed a strong consciousness"<sup>24</sup>, and in 1960 that this consciousness was "appealed to"<sup>25</sup>. Malan chooses 1976 as the year that "brought about a revolution in blacks' interpretation of their own power... 1976 was a watershed year also with regard to literature."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Malan surveys each decade as an autonomous unit with specific literary trends; for example, he says that "At the beginning of the eighties, writers found themselves increasingly involved in the ideological polarisations that demand various choices."<sup>27</sup> But he never shows how the political event and the creative impulse of a Soweto poet are inextricably fused, to the exclusion of all else. Neither does he explain how poets with differing political ideologies<sup>28</sup> can all react to an event in the same way.

A further weakness, in Chapman and Malan's use of Black Consciousness as a watershed ~~time~~ for Black poetry, is that when the flood becomes a mere trickle it is blamed on the absence of significant political events<sup>29</sup> - events that will adequately "appeal to" Soweto poets. Both critics, having placed an inordinate stress upon a particular date to interpret poetry, thus provide an inadequate critique of the wider poetical range. Rive frowns upon such a critical practice when he says:

It is a serious error of judgement to see, as some observers have done, that objection [the Soweto riots concerning "Bantu" education] as the single cause of the subsequent ugly confrontations that shook South Africa. It was, in fact, the culmination of decades of wrong, of discrimination and humiliation suffered by people who have never been allowed any say in the management of their own affairs.<sup>30</sup>

Black Consciousness emerges as an easy solution to critical dilemmas - as Glenn points out, "critical uncertainty makes itself felt in the desire for a 'quick fix' explanation in Black Consciousness...[but] what evidence of Black Consciousness or Black Power rhetoric or themes is there in the early work of Mtshali, Sipho Sepamla (whose education pre-dates Bantu Education), of Serote...we get no feeling of how particular individuals propagated, resisted or adapted to this new perspective."<sup>31</sup>

In addressing the above issues, it is necessary to turn now to the poetry attributed to the Black Consciousness movement. The South African researcher, as Robin Hallett has pointed out, "is at a disadvantage. Many of the works produced by members of the movement have now been banned and it is even

an offence to quote certain statements...when the statements are made by those to whom Section 11 (g) of the Internal Security Act is applicable."<sup>32</sup> But this is merely one problem, a far greater one being that black poetry is not always synonymous with Black Consciousness. As Gordimer points out, in The Black Interpreters, "the themes chosen by the new black poets are committed in the main to the individual struggle for physical and spiritual survival under oppression... but...there is little evidence of group feeling except in one or two of the young writers."<sup>33</sup>

In short, the poets' ideological viewpoints differ to such an extent that categories of definition are not suitable. Those who attempt categorization of the Black Consciousness poetry of the 1970's, thus run the risk of forcing it into an undifferentiated mass - something which, as will be argued in part IV of this chapter, it could never be. There is also the danger of reading too much into the upsurge of the poetry in the 1970's; for example, Robert Bertold attributes the "publishing explosion" to the "emergence of more enterprising publishers."<sup>34</sup> Chapman, on the other hand, feels that the 70's poetry shifted in emphasis - his statement, as has been shown, suggests that all poetry after the mid-seventies changes, without exception, into a poetry of resistance.<sup>35</sup> Chapman obviously ignores the danger of categorizing the poetry, and he underestimates the diverse forms of social expression that Serres illustrates are in every poem. In this sense, Chapman is similar in approach to Patel, who argues that the "critical impulse to write a poem may be nothing more than a political cause."<sup>36</sup>

The question arises, however, as to why Black Consciousness should find expression in the poetic form at all. The discourse of politics and poetry are different. There is definitely not a one to one relationship, but a fusion or merging - the universality of a form of expression not being probable, as Michel Serres has stressed. Ignoring the co-habitations of different systems or "provinces" of thought, and categorizing them with distinctions such as "Soweto poetry", "resistance poetry", "apocalyptic poetry" etc., is only regressive. As Sepamla says: "I think I write poetry that can be called social, political or what have you . But I don't think that I go out of my way to do that sort of thing."<sup>37</sup>

It may be established, therefore, that Black Consciousness writing is more of an intrinsic awareness of the colonized/ oppressed position in society, rather than an overt political manifesto. This answers the above question as to why Black Consciousness found expression in poetry, and not on the political platform. Sartre observes, for instance, that "Every age has its own poetry; in every age the circumstances of history choose a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch by creating situations that can be expressed or transcended only through poetry."<sup>38</sup>

In order to ascertain the extent of Black Consciousness in the poetry of the seventies and early eighties, it will now be necessary to examine the specific "qualities" that have been attributed to Black Consciousness poetry, and then assess to

what extent an arbitrarily selected group of poets fulfil these requirements. It has already been established that the poetry of Black Consciousness reveals a "psychological awareness" focussing on the diverse nature of ghetto life - Mafika Gwala adds to this quality the ability to stimulate "an awareness of positive values in the indigenous culture, which [ is ] in no way inferior to the European culture if taken within its own context." Black Consciousness poetry must thus have the ability to show concern "with racial oppression, but also point out the short-comings of orthodox modern awareness - the inverted idealism in hankering after bourgeois securities, the purposeless desperation of ghetto blacks and (in general) the alienation of the black in apartheid society."<sup>39</sup>

Black poets in the 70's, whose work exemplifies these qualities, range from Mazisi Kunene's Zulu Poems (1970) to Christopher van Wyk's first collection of poetry, It is time to go home (1979). It would be a gross generalization, however, to assume that other black 70's poets such as Paul Vilakazi, Sipho Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, Winston Nkondo, Casey Motsisi, Njabulo Ndebele, Mandlenkosi Langa and Mongane Serote also share a coherent or a consistent Black Consciousness or, indeed, a **lack** of revolutionary material. Serote, for example, in his poem Sunset, is clearly stressing the apocalyptic overthrow of the old order:

One day  
 when the sun bleeds like a giant's eye  
 its blood dripping on the clouds  
 and rushing to soak the earth  
 that day  
 when the sun blazes in the western sky  
 flames leaping into the blue sky  
 the earth red-hot -

I

shall hold my palms over my eyes,  
to shade the horror away  
to look at a brand new hope.<sup>40</sup>

Nkondo, on the other hand, fits the Black Consciousness mould perfectly. He speaks of finding the old and forgotten assertiveness of blacks in Africa - the elusive identity which is hidden under the technology of Europe. Writing in the first issue of New Classic, his search for identity is more "expository" in its bluntness than what Chapman calls "resistance" poetry: "I don't want all this cement smoothness/ I must go the way of the hare/Come back with the stride of a lion..."

Oswald Mtshali, who wrote as early as 1971 (Sounds of a cowhide drum), can be said to have the qualities required for the above "classification" of a Black Consciousness poet, and yet his lofty style would not be accessible to the people he is trying to give a sense of common identity to; for example:

The Miner (1974)

To stretch limbs  
leaden with weariness  
to wash a face  
daubed with gold tinted ochre  
and armpits mouldy  
with sweat of the Cocopan  
refusing to run down the rails  
of the ore-crushing mill.

It may thus be seen how the diverse social expression of Black Consciousness poetry articulates itself in two poets who, according to the critics discussed earlier in this chapter, should represent Mokgethi Motlhabi's common "Black Humanity". For example, there is the at times apocalyptic style

of Serote, the expository style of Nkondo, and the protest poetry of Mtshali which is aimed at a white audience. But these styles or labels, such as "expository", "apocalyptic", "revolutionary" or "protest", are unsuitable, as subsequent poems by the poets show evidence of them having swapped one style for another - for example, Mtshali's later work Weep not for a Warrior (1980) shows a complete transformation from The Miner (1974), and adopts both the apocalyptic and expository styles.

In Weep not for a Warrior, Mtshali illustrates the metamorphosis of warrior into freedom fighter. Gone is the passive protest of The Miner - it is replaced by apocalyptic visions of revolution: "A warrior never perishes; he is sustained by the glorious deeds of the departed;/ he eats the raw meat of fearlessness/ and awaits his canonisation in the realm of heroes,/ where all freedom fighters dwell(114-8).<sup>\*</sup> Mtshali blurs any "border" between traditional warrior and modern freedom fighter, and adopts the animal imagery of Nkondo: "Fear has no roots/strong enough to pierce/ the armoured heart of a man in bondage,/ whose unbridled anger tears the tiger from its lair,/ grabs the lion by its tail,/ spears the elephant on its trunk"(11 11-16).

One could also say that the above poem, in its indomitable positiveness in the face of bondage, shares a striking similarity with Jeremy Cronin's Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang. Cronin presents a prison scene with a black detainee polishing a doorhandle. The detainee's apparently broken and subservient

\* The bibliography for poems cited by title and lines only, appears in Appendix(Poems).

nature is deceptive, however, for once the warder is out of the way "His free hand, the talkative one, / Slips quietly behind / - Strength brother, it says, / In my mirror, a black fist" (ll 24-28). The possibilities are bewildering - Mtshali's next poem could be contrary to Cronin's but similar to Motsisi's - the ideological shifts (or cohabitations of thought), thematic developments and trajectories, infinite. Consequently, in terms of Serres' approach, it may be concluded that the critical presupposition of Black Consciousness informing all Soweto poetry is unfounded, because it does not address the possibility that cohabitations of different systems of thought exist within the poetry. It is thus extremely problematic for Chapman, Gardner, Barnett and Malan to assume that consistency and critical cohesion are applicable in the poetry of Black Consciousness, for, if it is impossible to label one poet, how can we label a diverse and culturally enriched body of poetry?

## II

### Consistency and cultural borrowing

Once the politicizing approach has posited Black Consciousness as a recurring theme in Soweto poetry, it becomes essential for them to isolate this poetry as a unique and distinctive art form. If this is not established, their argument descends to the level of pure conjecture. In order to avoid this, Chapman says of his most recent essay that it "will define poetry as the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies in South Africa, will provide a background against which this poetry may be seen, and will trace something of its development to date."<sup>41</sup> This statement implies that Soweto poetry is some detachable strand, and that it is a relatively

simple enterprise for a critic to find some settled and accepted framework against which a schematic progress may be charted. Indeed, Chapman becomes even more emphatic and states that "Soweto poetry...does seem the most satisfactory term for a distinct genre."<sup>42</sup> He thus ignores the danger Serres warns of - the danger of blind acceptance of the universal, when in fact a text opens onto other domains:

each domain has a philosophy of the relations of its truth to its system and of the circulation along these relations. In addition, it exhibits unique types of openings onto other domains...<sup>43</sup>

Chapman's generalizations are tantamount to saying that trends can be observed in a diverse, culturally enriched, and wide ranging thematic spectrum. Brink and Coetzee, in the introduction to their anthology A Land Apart, avoid this pitfall when they point out that, "if the outlines of a map of contemporary South African writing do seem to emerge, the map should be used cautiously and within the limits very cursorily sketched in this introduction."<sup>44</sup>

A further problem in the politicizing approach arises when Soweto poetry is evaluated as a stereotypically pure "phenomenon", rather than a maze of cultural borrowings. This, from a linguistic point of view, is in itself contradictory and requires "a critical understanding culled from a double standpoint, of the process by which...a true integration of an African content with a European means of expression is being worked out."<sup>45</sup> Chapman in fact does contradict himself when attempting to argue that Soweto poetry is "pure". In comparing Soweto poetry with the black poetry of the fifties and early sixties, for instance, he says that by contrast, "Soweto

poetry has made its rejection of Western literary and cultural continuities almost a moral and stylistic imperative," and yet he goes on to point out that it "is said Soweto poetry is the first distinctively black, as opposed to Western, oriented poetry to have emerged in English from black South Africans...but this is not strictly true."<sup>46</sup> He then argues that Soweto poetry was in fact influenced by the poetry of the 1930's and 1940's.<sup>47</sup> Admitting this, Chapman can no longer present a viable argument about consistency or lack of cultural borrowing in Soweto poetry.

Chapman, however, is not the only one who attempts to argue in favour of a culturally autonomous genre. Essop Patel, for example, in his essay "Towards Revolutionary Poetry", says that in terms of literature, "revolution implies the rejection of bourgeois literary concepts which undermine the development of the black writer. Once the black poet freed himself from Eurocentric literary conventions, then he was free to create within the context of a national consciousness. The black poet's starting point was the articulation of the black experience. It is the movement towards the development of revolutionary poetry."<sup>48</sup> Patel's argument thus also relies on the notion of the Soweto poets breaking free from Eurocentric influences. He underestimates the difficulties in articulating a "pure black" experience - within an already vague Black Consciousness context - and takes the construction of an "African aesthetic"<sup>49</sup> as readily attainable.

The quest for a universal black aesthetic, which shows no evidence of Eurocentric literary influences, is in vain.

Mandlenkosi Langa<sup>50</sup> observes that even if the search was only amongst black cultures, it would have to sift through a myriad of interwoven connections. For instance, tyrannical leaders, such as Shaka, and inter-tribal wars are just two historical factors which caused various black groups to move and interact with others. Tracing the marriages between diverse ethnic groups would uncover several layers of cultural assimilation, and so the idea, that some kind of stereotypical "black aesthetic" persisted through time in a historical vacuum, is untenable. For Lewis Nkosi, in "Black Power or Souls of Black Writers", the problem of formulating a common aesthetic is compounded by the fact that black writers "participate in two cultures simultaneously. Most of them have been trained in the European traditions of literature, have lived and have shared in some of the notions and philosophic assumptions prevalent in modern Europe."<sup>51</sup>

The Eurocentric influence in Soweto poetry is undeniable - communities do not live in autonomous cultural pockets. Furthermore, the English language, being a cultural storehouse of its own, makes any idea of a black aesthetic expressed in English laughable. The politicizing approach ignores this dilemma, as it does the fact that Soweto poetry is not exclusively black. In short, the poetry, being symbolically associated with apartheid and the denial of black rights in a white ruled society, reflects the position of many white writers, who feel and identify strongly with the social injustices outlined above.

It has been argued that someone such as Nadine Gordimer, however compassionate she might be about the plight of blacks, cannot

authentically portray the "black condition".<sup>52</sup> But what is an authentic black condition? It has been shown that terms, such as "black condition" and "Black Consciousness", are indefinable outside of a very specific historical context. Mtshali describes the black condition as depicting "stokvels, shebeens, police vans, prisons, churches, hospitals, trains, murders, rapes, robberies, night vigils and funerals - in short, all aspects of a black man's life"<sup>53</sup>, but this is not Soweto poetry. Soweto poetry does not merely reflect the "black man's aspirations, his hopes and disappointments, his joys and sorrows, his loves and hates"<sup>54</sup>; its scope has extended to include both black and white - for whites may also feel the "oppression" of a black condition. A powerful example of this common ground between black and white poets, is the law of South Africa. It is not only the black man's life that is shaped by the laws that govern him - a fact clearly depicted in Matthews' Trip to Botswana: "my soul welcomed my/ arrival/ it stilled my trembling flesh/ as a woman and man embraced/ though their colours were in contrast/ no hostile hand ripped them/ apart"(ll 11-18).

As far as Soweto poetry is concerned, therefore, issues such as injustice, political exile, enforced silence, and incarceration, to name but a few, are common emotive concepts to black, white, Indian and coloured poets. Consequently, there is little "colour consistency", and the inclusion of all these population groups in a collection of "black" South African poetry from 1891 - 1981,<sup>55</sup> attests to the fact that it is the writer's ability to effectively portray his subject matter that makes him a Soweto poet today. White "protest" poets may thus be

regarded as Soweto poets, if they display an authentic understanding and feeling for the black condition.

Jeremy Cronin is a white South African poet who may be identified with the Soweto poets. Like some of them, he has been imprisoned for his political beliefs, and his poetry is often an attempt to adapt or "break out" of the ruling white discourse by using both the vernacular,<sup>56</sup> and the African oral tradition. In Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang, for instance, an explanatory line after a graphic detail suggests that the poem is recited orally, together with the hand signals described in the poem: "I see the fingertips of his free hand/Bunch together, as if to make/ an object the size of a badge/ Which travels up to his forehead/The place of an imaginary cap(This means: A warder)" (ll 7-12). As can be seen, lines 7-11 would be the graphic hand signal shown and described to the auditor, while line 12 "(This means: A warder)", would be the oral explanation of the graphic detail.

Creative focussing on a distinctly black sphere of reference, however, does not allow these poets (black or white) to break free from Western literary and cultural continuities. Chapman's argument, that Soweto poetry is free from any "obviously imported models"<sup>57</sup>, is thus again proved incorrect - for Soweto poetry is fundamentally representative of black writers still grappling with conflicting ideas about their own identity. Even if the black poets of the seventies had not attempted to culturally borrow, they would have ultimately found that their "self censorship" led inevitably to no writing at all. As Manganyi has pointed out, "In our situation this individuality of the artist or writer is held hostage, not only by legal

ensorship, but perhaps more completely by self-censorship,"<sup>58</sup>

In using the poetic form, therefore, Soweto poets have had to make use of a medium that is centuries old and already culturally enriched. In an attempt to break out of this dominant literary form, they have allowed certain European poetic techniques to fall by the wayside. Oswald Mtshali, for instance, feels that Soweto poetry is a language of urgency and Soweto poets "have not got the time to embellish this urgent message with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments like rhyme, iambic pentameter, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style."<sup>59</sup> The urgent "message" is thus the priority of contemporary Soweto poets, even at the risk of ignoring crucial questions of man and his spiritual existence. Sepamla is one of the Soweto poets who realises this lack in Soweto poetry: "I sometimes wonder how much growth in the broader artistic sense we miss as a result of our fixation on protest. We seem incapable of communicating the insights of man and nature because we are forced to remind other people about their undesirable deeds toward us. I long for that day when this will not be my priority."<sup>60</sup>

The politicizing approach's claims to consistency and cultural "purity" are thus misleading. Many Soweto poets, for instance, actually feel the effects of assimilation into the white South African culture, and often write of a sense of rootlessness. This need to feel black again, or to feel one's roots, is poignantly presented in Shabbir Banoobhai's the morning caught me: "Oh what lack of love/ has caught me/ lingering here/ in a

land where night/ must come/ to wash me black again."(ll 13-18). Rootlessness also has wider social implications for the detribalised, industrialised and urbanised Soweto poet; he is faced with differing ideologies and cultural background in a white South Africa. Sipho Sepamla blames this "rootlessness" for the black Soweto poets' reliance on Eurocentric literary conventions:

Is it a wonder that there are very few ideas I tend to toy with? This is the challenge for the Black writer. In the past we have leaned too heavily on the thinking of Whites - friends and foes. The result has been that we have swayed like river-bank reeds<sup>61</sup>.

Soweto poetry that shows evidence of "leaning too heavily on the thinking of Whites", is undoubtedly Ben J. Langa's For My Brothers (Mandla And Bheki) In Exile. This poem is a reminiscence of a typically Western Christmas celebration, complete with custard and jelly (l 45). The most cultural borrowing, however, comes in the black man's memories of his younger days - playing a typically Western child's game: "cops and robbers, hide and seek" (l 12).

Yet another example of cultural borrowing by Soweto poets is found in the use of the overworked themes of Europe, such as freedom, democracy and equality, which are ever present in Soweto poetry; for example, Zuluboy Molefe's Nonkululeko, A Child Of Freedom:

You opened your eyes  
to vietnam, ireland,  
uganda, washington, moscow  
and pretoria  
beloved.<sup>62</sup>

The adaptation of Western metaphors does not allow the Soweto poet to finally break free "of structures that have hemmed him in"<sup>63</sup>, as Chapman has claimed. The English language is, with its specific cultural associations, inescapably an "imported model." Alvarez-Pereyre makes the same mistake as Chapman, when he says that if the Soweto poets "are very free with the 'Great Tradition', if, unlike the older generation, they show little evidence of formal research, they do not hesitate to turn to those natural and spontaneous aesthetic elements which can serve their purpose - chiefly alliteration and repetition, which they use in combination with a very great variety of rhythms..."<sup>64</sup> The "natural and spontaneous" elements, however, are also imported models and, as long as English is being used, the Soweto poet is locked into a sub-text. (Césaire, the Martiniquan poet, had the same dilemma when he attempted to break out of the ruling colonial discourse with surrealism<sup>65</sup>, but this in itself was a European 20th century movement). The Soweto poet cannot subsequently use Western literary techniques without identifying with the discourse he is apparently rejecting - a situation which Memmi believes is the "suicide of colonized literature."<sup>66</sup> Sepamla's I Remember Sharpeville is a prime example of alliteration which does not succeed in wrenching itself from the imprisoning syntax of Western literary form:

in a flash  
of the eye  
of gun-fire  
like spray flayed  
they fled they fell  
the air fouled  
the minute fucked  
and life fobbed <sup>67</sup>

Even if Soweto poets take refuge in the vernacular to conceal their cultural borrowing of themes and literary devices, the central framework of the poetry acts as a reminder that it is a Eurocentric adaptation - there is no escape. It may be concluded that the politicizing approach, in its emphasis upon the consistency and cultural purity of Soweto poetry, fails to trace the cultural assimilations and adaptations inherent in the poetry - a failure in the second evaluative distinction outlined in the introduction.

### III

#### The "shift" in Soweto Poetry

In his book, South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective, Chapman says that "the shift of intention from 'protest' to 'resistance' is a radical one",<sup>68</sup> and, in A Century of South African Poetry, he traces this shift from "the first graphic sketches of township existence in the poetry of Casey Motsisi" to protest and finally resistance poetry.<sup>69</sup> Colin Gardner also takes Chapman's line of argument, and states that there was a "crucial shift of emphasis within black poetry between the early 70's and the later 70's and the 80's. The shift is wholly explicable and coherent"<sup>70</sup>. The question arises as to why a vague period is given ("the 70's") when this shift was so "radical", "crucial", "explicable and coherent". These acts of gross generalization are damaging to any critical evaluation of Soweto poetry, for they reduce poetry to a one to one relationship with specific political moments. In this sense, Chapman and Gardner may be compared to the critics of the "ideological approach", in that they subordinate the aesthetic impulse to political structures - implying that the artist has no individual freedom in his creativity.

It has been proved how difficult - if not impossible - it is to universalize any of the "givens" in the politicizing approach. And yet, Black Consciousness, creative consistency and cultural autonomy within the poetry, are rationalized by an impure set of politicizing criteria. The fact that the human condition can never be universalized<sup>71</sup> does not perturb these critics. They seek another "quick fix" as a strategy in avoiding the diversity of Soweto poetry. In arguing for a thematic shift, they isolate and categorize poetry as "protest" or "resistance", and ignore thematic interplay; for instance, some of the poems in Serote's Yakhal'inkomo show signs of dynamic conflict - Johannesburg is depicted as both an enemy and an unavoidable means of livelihood - "This way I salute you:/My hand pulses at my back trousers pocket.../For my pass, my life/.../Jo'burg City, I salute you;/When I run out, or roar in a bus to you"(ll 1-13).<sup>72</sup> Beerhall Queen could even be perceived as anti-protest - the queen keeps men together and yet away from "this troublous world":

She's the Queen  
 She's slow in her strides  
 Careful in her holds -  
 That are as tender as a mother's hand -  
 Round the tin that's on her head  
 Bubbling the bitter brown beer  
 That keeps men and husbands  
 Away from this troublous world,  
 Together in her warm homely house.<sup>73</sup>

(ll 8-16)

The emphasis on the "people's struggle" is thus not as coherent as the politicizing approach declares; Serote's "Black Consciousness voice" cannot always be "finding its full power in an uncompromising poetry of resistance."<sup>74</sup> There is not a network of poets who follow a carefully defined trend and then

simultaneously "shift" to another. There is also not consistent proof that protest poetry "gradually evolves into a defiant and militant"<sup>75</sup> poetry. The politicizing approach can only indicate a shift by selecting poetry that fits their own specifically constructed themes or categories, and lumping it together under rigid titles such as "apocalyptic". What is never addressed is exactly at what point the apocalyptic style begins, how many poets are "apocalyptic poets", where the style ends and how another begins. In this sense, politicizing critics do not distinguish, as Serres would have it, the "network of codes in circulation."<sup>76</sup>

The inadequacy in the "shift theory" is that it implies that Soweto or Black Consciousness poetry is politics in disguise. What is overlooked, is that what the politicizing critics call protest or revolutionary literature, is often a search for identity - a personal and collective identity within the South African context. This poetry of regeneration is consequently not synonymous with protest or revolutionary literature. An example of poetry attempting to regenerate a black identity is Somhlahlo's Who wants to be mothered? This poetry is not filled with assertive revolutionary fervour, but rather with a dignified plea to allow blacks to find and plan their own destiny:

Do not do things for me, let me do them.  
 Think no thoughts for me, let me think them.  
 You bore me with your thoughts;  
 Who wants to be mothered ?

As a baby, mother carried me,  
 On her back she bound me tight  
 As a boy she let me run.  
 In front of her she let me run.

As a lad she let me roam,  
 Away from home I could even roam;  
 She knew what she was doing  
 So do not mother me...

I knew my home and who my mother was,  
 She knew I would return and return I did.  
 Return I did and loving remained.  
 To trust her I learnt, obey her, never questioned.

Live for me she never tried.  
 Live for myself, thus did I learn.  
 I know my goal  
 So do not mother me.

Show me the way, do not walk the way for me.  
 My legs are strong, my head not closed, O please not closed  
 I know my goal so  
 Do not mother me. 77

Chapman also argues that there is a shift from Soweto poets using Western ideals of justice, to "the highest of African ideals: heroism."<sup>78</sup> Gardner adopts exactly the same argument in "Irony and Militancy in Recent Black Poetry."<sup>79</sup> Apart from the fact that epic heroes (embodying a nation's conception of its past history) go as far back as the Iliad and the Odyssey, both critics again attempt to rigidly distinguish one theme from another. They never concede that cohabitation of both, or even more themes, are in a continual metamorphosis in the production of Soweto poetry. Their critical limitations are summed up by Mphahlele, when he says that there is "a tendency for some critics to draw a line of separation between the poetry of Black Consciousness and what went before by characterizing the latter as mere 'protest' addressed to white authority, whereas the new voice purports to speak directly to the poet's own community . This is an oversimplification."<sup>80</sup>

It may be concluded, therefore, that Soweto poetry is not thematically consistent enough to allow universal trends to be drawn. The politicizing approach nevertheless relies on this misnomer, to impose "shifts" of their own making. These shifts, they argue, are caused by the Black Consciousness poetry reacting directly to political events. Again this approach is seen to favour a specific political ideology or system of thought, thereby ignoring the possibility of there being different thought co-habitations - the first evaluative distinction outlined in the introduction. The last word in this section belongs to Gwala:

Without calling people to a sermon I do wish to point out that Black Consciousness does not mean politics disguised as literature. Neither does it mean 'anti-white' writing as some headshrinkers love to categorize.<sup>81</sup>

#### IV

##### Problems of categorization

As has been repeatedly stressed, it is important not to generalize or categorize Soweto poetry - not all of it is, to use Livingstone's words, "merely blurted out angers against concrete, or Whitey."<sup>82</sup> The politicizing approach, however, categorizes Soweto poetry with distinct labels, such as "Participatory poetry" or "People's poetry". Chapman says that these "labels all have a certain fitness",<sup>83</sup> and distinguishes phases, such as "pre-Azanian",<sup>84</sup> which divide the poetry. It has been established that these arbitrary phases cannot prove formal, ideological and thematic consistencies - there is rather an unexplored dynamic at work, like the one found in Serote's City Johannesburg and Beerhall Queen. As Couzens observes, "It

is a mistake of South African critics to tend to lump all black writers together, classifying them all, for instance, as 'protest' writers, without analysing differences in ideologies ...one can find different ideological strains between poets, or, indeed, within the same poet."<sup>85</sup>

It is possible to see radical differences in a diverse body of poetry, but to argue that these differences are so absolute that they constitute a category of their own, is biased in the extreme. Rive, for instance, has proved how varied are the poems of Mtshali, Serote and Sepamla.<sup>86</sup> Categorization thus tends to limit the evaluation of Soweto poetry - value-judgements being based on whether the poem is a good or bad "protest" poem, or "apocalyptic" poem etc. Izevbaye, in African Literature Today, has argued that critics should reject these "entrenched modes of thinking which perpetuate the stock attitudes to Africa."<sup>87</sup> Such attitudes find expression in the way critics of the politicizing approach lump black poetry together.

Heywood, for instance, believes that "South African literature in English falls into three periods, 1830-1910, 1910-1960, and 1960 to the present day."<sup>88</sup> He chooses 1960 as the time from which black poetry may be categorized. In this sense, he is trying to argue that a mass poetic movement took place by imposing chronological divisions - which, as Cecil Abrahams points out, cannot work in South Africa. In his paper, "A Stubborn Case: Problems in Developing a South African Literary History", Abrahams says:

The organization of this conference around the theme "History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature" indicates once again that

in the literary critic's mind there is almost an obsessive need to organize the cultural activities of a nation along the well-established Western tradition of having a beginning, a middle and an end. This tradition, which has proven itself to be quite suitable to the literary culture of the West, has not fared very well where the culture of nations with an oral background and a socio-political development of unordinary proportions have had to be considered.<sup>89</sup>

Heywood's generalizations may be compared to those of Lennox-Short,<sup>90</sup> who also attempts a poetic categorization. As Stephen Gray has observed, the collection's "system of classification is alphabetical, but within colour lines. So-called coloured and black writers in English are, in this volume, relegated to a buffer zone between English white writers and Afrikaners in English translation, as if the race classification of apartheid were a sound methodology for literary criticism to adopt as well."<sup>91</sup> Both Lennox-Short and Heywood fail to allow for Serre's "interconnections" in their rigid classifications - they attempt to beacon off poetry into an inadequate catalogue, and assume that this will somehow prove it a singular cultural development. But Abrahams warns that to assume "a South African literature exists in the same sense as more stable literary traditions will...lead the student and critic of South African literature into making many false statements in regard to South African writing."<sup>92</sup>

In order to illustrate the impossibility of categorizing Soweto poetry, it will now be necessary to examine a few randomly

selected poets - Faller, Martins, Stemmet, Banoobhai and Gwala.

Faller's poetry draws upon the image of "Mama Afrika" or just simply "Mama". This maternal, earthy element of Soweto poetry is the exact opposite of the painful and bloody voices of the struggle, as depicted in something like Achmat Dangor's The Voices that are Dead. Faller's Were the Muse to Come presents the black Muse as one of the common people: "Were the Muse to come,/ how would we distinguish her/ from other loitering unemployed?" (ll 10-12). This feature is consistent with other Soweto poetry in its attempt to depict a collective black experience. (Oswald Mtshali points out, for instance, that Soweto poetry "portrays the lives of the people who find themselves helpless victims in vicious circumstances not of their own making")<sup>93</sup>. But Faller's poem also shows the suppression of Soweto poets and their poetry: "The mysteries of her tongue/ would mean an urgent phone call/ to the state police./ Muse, Mama, come inside tonight,/ you can't be forever on the run./ I'll hide you in the bedroom/ While you hammer on the air/ the anguish you've arrested in your lungs" (ll 24-31).

Dikobe Martins' Time To Come Home also depicts the maternal and earthy Mama (representing the coming of a free black Mama Afrika). Martins' poem, however, moves chronologically from ancestral songs to "the bullet refrain/ on the morning breath of goch street" (ll 12-13) and culminates in a celebration of immediate expression: "Oh, Mama!/ tell Makeba and Masekela/ Inkos'sikelele verse comes down/ like summer rain Jol'inkomo/ 'Tis time to come home" (ll 24-28). Faller's poem, on the other hand, deals only with the Muse in the present time.

Farouk Stemmet's Custodian Of Our Spirit presents the indomitable "spirit of black Africa". The spirit's image, in contrast to the above poems, does not take a maternal form but is nevertheless still "earthy" in the shape of the Baobab. The tree, like the intrepid black spirit, stands firm against assimilation or suppression: "you have never been colonised/ you have always belonged/ to the soil in which you stand/though your branches/ may be chopped and pruned/ you remain yourself/...you will live forever/'Oh Africa, seek your spirit in me'"(ll 17-31). Different to this again is Shabbir Banoobhai's the morning caught me which, as has been shown, is an expression of the black poet's weakness in escaping assimilation - there is no intrepid spirit here,"where night/must come/to wash me black again"(ll 16-18).

All the above poems' diverse social concerns may be seen to mutate even more when Gwala's poetry is added. Instead of the Muse or nature imagery, Gwala's Afrika at a Piece projects a futuristic overthrow of the established order:"We shall sing songs that Tiro would have loved to hear/ Songs Ma Ngoyi would have sung/...Songs that lead us on/And when its Time To Rise/ The Isle of Makana will be flooded/ by the swelling tide of Kwancha/Batho ba Sechaba/hora e Sithile!/The Hour has come!" (ll 86-96). On the other hand, Gwala also adapts his futuristic poetry and satirizes the media "reports" of the white South African government - reports from "John Vorster/where Timol dived thru the window/ at Auden House/ where Mduli made a somersault stunt/ at Sanlam Building/ where Biko knocked himself against walls/ at the Kei Road copshop/ where Mapetla thought hanging was fun/ at Caledon Square/ where the Imam Haroon

slipped on a bar of soap"(ll 66-75).

There is no consistency in the thematic concerns of the above poems - even the "revolutionary" Gwala changes his style from time to time. The task of categorization thus becomes a hazardous guess, as the foundations, upon which politicizing assumptions are made, continually and simultaneously displace one another. Any attempt at classification necessarily prejudices the critical evaluation, because, instead of the aesthetic form, the critic would be faced with labelled "units" depicting apocalypse or revolution. In this sense, politicizing categorization is found to be deficient; it transgresses both the critical distinctions outlined in the introduction and exhibits a glaring inability to address the complex dynamic in the poetry.

## NOTES

2. The Politicizing Approach

- 1.S.Biko quoted on day four of his trial in Millard Arnold's (ed) The Testimony of Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa p.242.
- 2.N.Manganyi "Being Black in the World" p.22.
- 3.P.Frankel "Status, Group Consciousness and Political Participation: Black Consciousness in Soweto" in University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop February 1987, p.5.
- 4.A.Boesak Farewell to Innocence pp.54-55.
- 5.A.Khoapa The South African Outlook June/July 1972 p.10.  
This quote was extracted from Khoapa's speech about Black Consciousness, given on the steps of Jameson Hall, University of Cape Town.
- 6.R. Fatton Black Consciousness in South Africa, p.67.
- 7.M.Motlhabi Black Resistance to Apartheid, pp.111-112.
- 8.S.A. Survey of Race Relations 1972, pp.28-9 (my emphasis).
- 9.M.Chapman A Century of South African Poetry, p.27.
- 10.M.Chapman South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective, p.183.
- 11.M.Chapman "Soweto Poetry: Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's" in C.Malan(ed) Race and Literature p.175.
- 12.M.Chapman South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective p.183(my emphasis).
- 13.M.Chapman ibid p.240.
- 14.M.Chapman A Century of South African Poetry p.27 see also the use of the term in Chapman's essay "Soweto Poetry: Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's" in C.Malan(ed) op cit p.175.

- 15.M.Chapman ibid p.28 (my emphasis).
- 16.I am indebted to T.Couzens, who has argued in his essay "Black Poetry in Africa", in J.A.Polley and P.Wilhelm op cit, that poetry was a continuous form of resistance p.56. See also Ncongwane's survey of protest literature, in C.Malan(ed) op cit pp.6,8, which proves protest literature appeared long before 1976.
- 17.C.Gardner "Irony and Militancy in Recent Black Poetry" in The English Academy Review 3,1985,p.81.
- 18.C.Gardner "Poetry and/or Politics:Recent South African Black verse" in English In Africa vol.9 no.1 May 1982,p.47.
- 19.M.Mzamane op cit p.50. See also his introduction to Serote Selected Poems p.9, where he states that Serote's poems are written within the traditions of Black Consciousness.
- 20.U.Barnett op cit p.34.
21. ibid p.35.
- 22.E.Mphahlele "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: the path that breaks the heels," in English Academy Review vol.3,1985,p.75.
- 23.M.Chapman South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective pp.183-4. See also M.Chapman "Soweto Poetry:Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's" in C.Malan op cit,p.178.
- 24.C.Malan "Race and Literature" in ibid p.7.
25. ibid p.8.
26. ibid pp.7-8.
27. ibid p.10.
- 28.As K.Sole points out in "Class,Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948-60" in History Workshop: University of the Witwatersrand seminar paper 3-7,February 1978,p.19.
- 29.J.Cronin,"The law that says/ constricts the breath-line (...)":South African English Language Poetry Written by

Africans in the 1970's" in The English Academy Review 3, 1985, observes that there is now a slowing down in the appearance of black poetry, p.44.

30.R.Rive Writing Black pp.150-151.

31.I.Glenn "Review" in English in Africa vol.10,no.2,1983,p.82.

32.R.Hallett "New Winds of Change" in University of Cape Town History Workshop Paper no.1,1976,p.5.The following works were prohibited for this dissertation:

S.Biko "White Racism and Black Consciousness" in Student Perspectives on South Africa;

F.J.van Wyk's "Black Consciousness - The Institute's position as I see it" in Race Relations 120/72,15 Dec 1972;

"Black Consciousness, a report on a seminar held by the Western Regions of S.A.Institute of Race Relations", RR 64/72;

Richard Turner "Black Consciousness, the black artist and the emerging black culture" in SASO Newsletter, May/June 1972;

N.Pityane "What is Black Consciousness?" Papers from Black Theology conference Edendale YMCA 13-16 February 1973; and

B.Langa "Black Consciousness in the Black Community" in SASO Newsletter Durban, May/June 1975.

33.N.Gordimer op cit p.54.

34.R.Bertold in M.Chapman(ed) Soweto Poetry p.176.

35.ibid p.12.

36.E.Patel in M.J.Daymond et al(eds) op cit p.86.

37.S.Sepamla quoted in M.Chapman(ed) Soweto Poetry p.180.

38.J.P.Sartre quoted in F.Fanon Black Skin White Masks p.95.

39.M.Gwala "Black Writing Today" in Staffrider, Johannesburg vol.2 no.3, July-August 1979.

40.M.Serote in M.Mzamane(ed) Serote: Selected Poems p.57.

41.M.Chapman "Soweto Poetry: Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's" in C.Malan(ed) op cit, p.176.

42. *ibid* p.176 (my emphasis).
43. M. Serres quoted in J.V. Harari and D.F. Bell (eds) p.xiv.
44. A. Brink and J.M. Coetzee (eds) *op cit* p.7.
45. C. Heywood (ed) Perspectives on African Literature p.20.
46. M. Chapman in C. Malan (ed) *op cit* p.178. See also M. Chapman English South African Poetry: A Modern Perspective p.197 and M. Chapman (ed) Soweto Poetry p.19.
47. *ibid* p.178.
48. E. Patel "Towards Revolutionary Poetry" in M.J. Daymond et al (eds) *op cit* p.85.
49. *ibid* p.85.
50. M. Langa "Cultural Invasion" in Medu 1.4, 1979 p.26.
51. L. Nkosi Home And Exile And Other Selections, pp.113-114.  
See also E. Mphahlele "The tyranny of place and aesthetics: the South African case" in C. Malan (ed) *op cit* p.52.
52. M. Chapman (ed) Soweto Poetry p.133.
53. *ibid* p.106.
54. *ibid* p.106 (my emphasis).
55. See T. Couzens and E. Patel (eds) The Return of the Amasi Bird.
56. i.e. in the title to his poem Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang. Cronin has admitted, however, that he is not pretending to be African or "trying for black" as he puts it: see S. Gardner (ed) *op cit* p.17.
57. M. Chapman (ed) Soweto Poetry p.19.
58. N.C. Manganyi Looking Through the Keyhole p.71.
59. O. Mtshali quoted in M. Chapman (ed) Soweto Poetry, p.110.

60. *ibid* p.116.

61. S. Sepamla "The Black Writer In South Africa Today: Problems And Dilemmas" in New Classic No.3, 1976 p.24 (my emphasis).

62. In R. Royston (ed) To Whom It May Concern, p.94.

63. M. Chapman "Soweto Poetry: Socio-literary phenomenon of the 1970's" in C. Malan (ed) *op cit* p.182.

64. J. Alvarez-Pereyre *op cit* p.242.

65. As Mazisi Kunene points out in the introduction to Aimé Césaire's Return To My Native Land p.14, 23.

66. A. Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized p.111, Memmi feels that the linguistic ambiguity of the black poet "is the symbol and one of the major causes of his cultural ambiguity" p.108.

67. S. Sepamla in New Classic November 3, 1976, p.66.

68. M. Chapman, South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective, p.194.

69. M. Chapman, A Century of South African Poetry, p.27.

70. C. Gardner "Irony and Militancy in Recent Black Poetry" in The English Academy Review, 3, 1985, p.83 (my emphasis).

71. See, for instance, Fanon's objections to O. Mannoni's universalizing theories in F. Fanon *op cit* pp.68-76.

72. M. Serote in M. Mzamane (ed) *op cit* pp.22-23.

73. *ibid* p.28.

74. M. Chapman in C. Malan (ed) *op cit* pp.176-7.

75. As J. Alvarez-Pereyre attempts to prove in *op cit* p.200.

76. M. Serres quoted in J. V. Harari and D. F. Bell (eds) *op cit* p.xxiv (my emphasis).

77. B. Somhlahlo in R. Royston (ed) *op cit* p.90 (the fourth stanza is omitted).

- 78.M.Chapman in C.Malan(ed) op cit p.177 (my emphasis).
- 79.C.Gardner "Irony and Militancy in Recent Black Poetry" in The English Academy Review 3,1985 p.83.
- 80.E.Mphahlele "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: the path that breaks the heels" in English Academy Review vol.3 1985 p.76.
- 81.M.Gwala "Black Writing Today" in Staffrider vol.2 no.3 July-August 1979.
- 82.D.Livingstone "The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and others in English: Notes towards a critical evaluation" in New Classic No.3 1976 p.62.
- 83.M.Chapman South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective p.184.
84. *ibid* p.193: see also p.243 where he explains the "divisions" which helped define the earliest South African English poetry. On the other hand, Abrahams, in D.Riemenschneider(ed) has convincingly argued that "it is several times more harder to argue the position that there is an overall South African literature which has a definite trend of development." p.135.
- 85.T.Couzens in P.Wilhelm and J.A.Polley(eds) op cit pp.54-55.
- 86.R.Rive Selected Writings pp.76-85.
- 87.D.S.Izevbaye "The State of Criticism in African Literature" in African Literature Today No.7 1975 p.3.
- 88.C.Heywood(ed) "Introduction: The Quest for Identity" in Aspects of South African Literature, pp.xii-xiii.
- 89.C.Abrahams "A Stubborn Case: Problems in Developing a South African Literary History" in D.Riemenschneider(ed) op cit p.134.
- 90.A.Lennox-Short(ed) English and South Africa.
- 91.S.Gray op cit pp.8-9.

92.C.Abrahams in D.Riemenschneider(ed) op cit p.137.

93.Mtshali quoted in M.Chapman(ed) Soweto Poetry p.108

(my emphasis).

### 3. THE IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH

#### I

#### Materialist vs Aesthetic

In their emphasis upon content in Soweto poetry, the critics who employ the "ideological approach" do not do justice to the aesthetic component of individual works.<sup>1</sup> Their criticism fails to move beyond a technical intellectual exercise in "proving" that the artist has no creative freedom outside the ideological construct - be it Marxist or Leninist, or a combination of the two. The ideological approach is thus inadequate in addressing anything outside the poem's political function, or the materialist conditions of its existence, for the individual only exists in a political context and as a representative of how materialist conditions have shaped his or her life. This belief can only be severely limiting and a falsification of the aesthetic impulse, when viewed in terms of Serres' wider context. Nkosi goes as far as calling it "crudely reductionist":

Art and literature, it is thought, should provide the sheerest propaganda for the liberation movement on pain of being declared effete and uninteresting. The people who adopt this view usually imagine themselves to be Marxists.

Far from what is generally supposed...both Marx and Engels took a highly complex view of literature, marked by an extremely sensitive response to individual works. Theirs was never a crudely reductionist view of literature which merely means reducing a poem to the political conditions of its existence...

Neither is art reducible to ideology, although it enjoys a close coexistence with ideology. Art continually undermines the ideology of the author himself.<sup>2</sup>

The question arises as to how this critical approach can assume that art is reducible to ideology, especially in such a diverse medium as that of Soweto poetry. Even the poets themselves are unaware of exactly which ideology they foster - Siphos Sepamla, for instance, admits this to be the case:

What I have always regretted is the lack of some ideology as a point of departure. My cultural background has too many gaps for me to have a solid base. Like a child growing up in a restrictive home, I have known too many don'ts. Capitalism, which is the only system I've seen in operation, I can't claim to know that well... Socialism tends to confuse me because it seems to have too many heads or voices. As for Communism which appears to have gripped many Black writers in America, well, the less said of that swear word in South Africa, the better, I suppose. <sup>3</sup>

And yet a critic such as Horn will argue that "every single literary text is the ideological expression of sectional or class interests."<sup>4</sup> Horn, like Kelwyn Sole, believes that the aesthetic content of poetry is "narrow subjectivism" when compared to class and material interests: "The mere fact that we recognize that not only the contents but also the focus of poetry are always related to the class and the class interests of the class producing them and consuming them, liberates us from the narrow subjectivism of aestheticism."<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on the economic base over the superstructure, which has its source in Marxist-Leninist philosophy, subsequently results in the opinion that the poet has no creative freedom outside the materialist structure - as Horn observes: "If... we accept that the human subject is not homogeneous and not in control of itself... that he is constructed by a structure whose

very existence escapes his size, then the analysis of poetry cannot treat poetry as the expression of a unified and unique individual but as a structure which reflects the structure, to whose transformation the subject is subjected."<sup>6</sup> This statement, in its stress on the universal, would also be rejected by Serres as an inadequate and prejudiced critique. The ideological approach's criteria for evaluation emerge, therefore, as impressionistic assessments which rely heavily on the poem being reducible to its political and materialist conditions of existence. The approach does not concede that different cohabitations of thought may exist side by side, or displace each other.

Criticism, which relies on ideological content, leads to the danger of Soweto poetry becoming mere political pamphleteering. It is not denied that Black Consciousness is often an integral part of the form, but to evaluate Soweto poetry only in its political context, overrides any aesthetic focus on the poetry itself. Horn, for instance, rejects I.A. Richards' "practical criticism" method as never having provided or consistently formulated an evaluative method for literature,<sup>7</sup> but has the ideological approach? By analysing Soweto poetry in the vacuum of so-called "universal criteria", various other formulating influences are missed or ignored in the critical onslaught. Consequently, Soweto poetry is only perceived to be created for an effective political message. The fact that the poetry can also be created as a result of politics is overlooked; for example, the Soweto poet is a silenced poet but this suppression creates the "cry"/"chant"/"Black aesthetic"/"spirit of Africa" or "voice" of Soweto poets. In other words the "silencing" of Soweto poets creates poetry in itself.

Kelwyn Sole is another South African critic who disregards any aesthetic constructs:

Writers who wish to mould a political literature which has meaning for and involves lower class people need to debunk mythical constructs and instead, widen communication and participation in their literature. What South Africa perhaps needs now are political writers who...address questions and problems with real meaning to the working class.<sup>8</sup>

Sole's concern with value-laden codes, like "communication and participation", is indeed so radical that he cannot understand why artists such as Mphahlele and Modesane did not choose journalism.<sup>9</sup> "Direct communication and relevance" become his evaluative criteria and he contrasts these "artistic" ideals with Black Consciousness literature, which "dwells on the issue of skin colour at the expense of an understanding of the economic causes of exploitation..."<sup>10</sup> It is as if Sole sees the rôle of poetry more as stirring reportage, than an art form. In his essay "The Abortion of the Intellect", for instance, he states that South African literature "needs to dig its roots deeper than an elite audience and self-propagating group of devotees. It needs to experiment and find forms and techniques which will make it a more potent weapon of individual and social resistance."<sup>11</sup>

This approach to Soweto poetry is only viable if it foregrounds the materialist conditions in black culture. In this sense it inverts the order of the linguistic approach, and Sole has actually condemned a linguistic approach (Ulliyat) for "an over-preponderance of superficial textual analysis at the expense of any attempt to research and study the material conditions, which inform black culture and, therefore, literature."<sup>12</sup> (Cronin ,

on the other hand, has attempted to analyse poetry with a Marxist and linguistic approach). Sole's condemnation is surprisingly entitled "Prejudiced Approach" - he does not, however, realise the extent of his own materialist obsession.

It may thus be seen how both Horn and Sole take the materialist conditions in the production of literature as their point of entry, at the expense of any aesthetic determinants. They ignore the interplay between ideology and art, focussing on socio-economic models which are only a part of Serres' cultural mosaic. Their resultant critique is an over-simplification of the complexity and diversity of Soweto poetry. For example, Gwala, who is regarded by the critics of the politicizing approach as one of the most "apocalyptic" poets with his Afrika at a Piece, would be seen by the ideological approach to further Marxist ideology - this call to fellow blacks to revolt could be construed as the Marxist prerequisite of a revolution by a class conscious proletariat, who would then control the means of production. Indeed, Gwala could even represent the socialist positivist hero, extolled by Marxian thought, who would turn the passive worker into an actor: "hora e fithile! / The Hour has come!" (ll 95-96). But what ideology is present in Gwala's Food For The Couple?:

He hadn't gone to the wedding ceremony  
at the local parish.

I asked him why.

"Man, it's my brother Sitha", he started.

"He courted her for three years

They went steady for four years.

They quarrelled, he went to Jo'burg

And more he didn't want her

There were brighter gals there -

What was she but an old maid?

Away he went for five years.

Until he heard she was marrying  
this morning her former highschool day teacher  
- his arch rival.

He came back last night - almost greying all over.  
And a damned stupid thing he did  
this morning. He hanged himself  
- in the lavatory."<sup>13</sup>

Gwala's poem above does not contain any ideological propaganda message. The jilted lover was not forced by a "privileged white minority" to leave his girlfriend on some migrant labour contract; he leaves of his own accord because "he didn't want her". His suicide is not an expression of defiance against the apartheid regime, but rather a bitter jealousy of his "arch rival". The ideological approach, if faced with this change in Gwala's style, would no doubt attribute it to his becoming a feeble writer for the petit-bourgeoisie instead of the workers.

The same aesthetic diversity can be seen in Serote. Here again is a "revolutionary" poet who can express both Black Consciousness, in a poem like Hell, Well, Heaven<sup>14</sup>, and can stir the people with My Brothers in the Streets<sup>15</sup>, A Poem on Black and White<sup>16</sup> and For Don M.-Banned<sup>17</sup>. But he can also write poetry that is ideologically passive - poetry without any overt political manifesto for a particular group:

A Poem

Everyone of us

throbs footsteps inside the chest of the earth  
for we belong there

The earth is always tight-lipped  
but only talks to itself  
perturbed by its throbs

Each of us will answer  
 when the worms dig in and out of us for truth,  
 below the earth.<sup>18</sup>

Gwala and Serote's two poems illustrate the difficulty in subordinating the aesthetic to some "universal" ideological grid reading. The poet's ideology may be absent from the poems altogether, or, if it does find expression, takes on inconsistent thematic shifts. This raises the question of how ideological approaches are able to trace every work of art back to a materialist perspective. In other words, how much ideological content is actually evident in the poem and how much is read into it by the critic? Is the critic not voicing his own impressions/social commitment?

The above questions are best answered by Vaughan, the third ideological critic in this group, when he says that his "own position is not that of a neutral surveyor of the field. On the contrary, my interest in ideological directions stems from my own type of ideological commitment. My sense of liberation is of a force in social struggle, a force by means of which social parties conceptualise themselves and their relation to the other social parties that make up the social totality, a force by means of which conceptual programmes are established and developed by such parties, as stratagems in the struggle for social power."<sup>19</sup> Vaughan, like Horn and Sole, thus reveals his methodology as that which confines itself to a specific ideology - this approach subsequently does not address the possibility that cohabitation of different systems of thought exist within Soweto poetry.

## II

## Petit-bourgeois and Worker poetry

The ideological approach draws a distinction between "petit-bourgeois" and "worker" poetry, but does not allow for any interplay between the two styles. Like the politicizing categories, petit-bourgeois and worker poetry are rigid classifications which are necessary for the ideological critique or evaluation. Before this critique can become operable, there have to be clearly demarcated class structures<sup>20</sup> between the white bourgeoisie and ruling class, who "live the material reality"<sup>21</sup>, the black petit-bourgeoisie, who do not own the means of production of the bourgeoisie but aspire towards this objective, and the proletariat or workers.

In the South African context, the ideological critics believe that any poet who writes in the discourse mode of the white bourgeoisie and ruling class, must necessarily be influenced by that class and, therefore, cannot articulate the concern of a black "worker" community. It is thought that even if poets are opposed to the apartheid ruling class ideology, they are still at the risk of losing their credibility: "The thoughts of the ruling class - the apartheid system - because the ruling class possesses the means of material and ideal production, are at the same time the ruling thoughts, and even the opponents of the ruling class can escape the dominant structure of ideas only with difficulty."<sup>22</sup> For the ideological approach then, the poet's political allegiance must be assessed before he is deemed a sincere worker poet.

The above distinctions between petit-bourgeois and worker poetry

raise a number of problems with this approach. To begin with, worker poetry, which was first published in 1985 in Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle,<sup>23</sup> does not show a clean break with the "revolutionary" or "resistance" message of Serote or Gwala - both styles straddle each other's ideological borders. It would be too presumptuous to argue that the politically overt worker poetry only addresses an intellectually weak proletariat/ worker community, and that petit-bourgeois poetry only addresses black intellectuals. Cronin, for instance, speaking of the Soweto poetry of the 1970's, correctly points out that it is wrong to draw a division which dismisses this poetry as petit-bourgeois: "In the first place , all black people in South Africa are subjected to linguistic and cultural oppression. The issues addressed by this poetry are not therefore merely petty-bourgeois. Secondly, the poetry has had an impact beyond a small circle of black intellectuals. In many cases it was, and still is, working-class youth listening to and performing this poetry."<sup>24</sup>

The distinctions between the two "types" of poetry, thus turn the poetry genre into merely a petit-bourgeois intellectual exercise on the one hand, and the voice of black Africa on the other. A problem arises, however, in the methodology of classification. Generalized terms, like petit-bourgeois and worker poetry, presuppose a one to one relationship with a specific ideology. However, it is not an easy exercise to trace the authenticity of the poet's class and ideological position, before one begins to read his or her poem. Class positions often merge or change entirely in the course of the poet's life - so too do political stances.<sup>25</sup> Sole, however, implies that there is a method of

establishing who the genuine worker poets are:

...writers have the opportunity to try and make their works become popular, with their political content. Claims to be "the voice of the black people" by black writers of varying political persuasions need to be looked at more critically in the light of the ongoing struggle for popular support by opposition groups in this country.<sup>26</sup>

Sole's argument suggests ~~it~~ necessary for the critic to evaluate the writer or poet's class position, and the response to his or her class context.<sup>27</sup> There is no subsequent focus on art's multi-faceted existence, except as "economic, political and social factors shape and limit artistic production."<sup>28</sup> The line of argument again subordinates the aesthetic impact of poetry to a political manifesto - a medium by which the working class may be called upon to alter the relations of production in the apartheid system. This means that the ideological approach's yardstick for poetry is based on popular appeal, or, as Sole puts it, the way in which "small groups of literary activists can link into and influence the growth of popular and dynamic culture appealing to as many people as possible."<sup>29</sup> The question arises as to whether worker poets, as opposed to so-called Soweto petit-bourgeoisie poets, are indeed capable of using a poetic medium to articulate the black experience.

In order to answer the above question, it is necessary to compare the two forms of poetry and the ideological criteria used to evaluate them. In the Soweto poetry of Mtshali, Marxist-Leninist critics would immediately impose the label "petit-bourgeois". He draws upon the culture of the "white bourgeoisie and ruling classes", and his poetry may, as a consequence, only be accessible to white or black intellectuals. Mtshali, however, is

representative of a Soweto poet whose political convictions, and the artistic methods in which they find expression, do not operate by foregrounding. For example, Mtshali is able to depict the tragic deaths of three black prisoners who were left stranded in a police van, without once resorting to worker poetry invective:

Ride Upon The Death Chariot

They rode upon  
the death chariot  
to their Golgotha -  
three vagrants  
whose papers to be in Caesar's empire  
were not in order:

The sun  
shrivelled their bodies  
in the mobile tomb  
as airtight as canned fish

We're hot!  
We're thirsty!  
We're hungry!

The centurion  
touched their tongues  
with the tip of a lance  
dipped in apathy:

"Don't cry to me  
but to Caesar who  
crucifies you."

A woman came  
to wipe their faces  
She carried a dishcloth  
full of bread and tea

We're dying

The centurion  
washed his hands. 30

In this poem Mtshali effectively equates imperial Rome with

South Africa - his political message may be subtle and covert, but his medium is poetry and not declarative journalism or reportage. M. Bowra has argued that "serious political poetry must take account of purely poetical values ...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."<sup>31</sup>

Sole would disagree with Bowra - for Sole, "working class literature..., strictly defined, relates to a number of factors and social determinants. The factors most commonly taken into account include the author(s) class position and ideological proclivities; the ideological contents of the work and the form/genre in which it is created...audience and means of dissemination; and what is designated 'proletarian world view'"<sup>32</sup>.

Mtshali's poem would fail so dismally in each of these "determinants", that his poetry would not be worthy of any ideological evaluation beyond the effete classification "petit-bourgeois". Recent worker poetry, on the other hand, would fulfil all Sole's determining factors. The poets are all factory workers; they all believe in liberating the worker from capitalist exploitation and oppression; their poetry speaks of mobilizing the proletariat; the target audience comprises mainly other workers; and the proletarian world view is consistent with Marxist ideology. The strong ideological potential of this poetry can be seen in some of the first worker poems to appear in 1985; for instance, Hlatshwayo's We Workers Are A Worried Lot!:

Fear is a fallacy

Now

Let us tread on your untouchable sacred ground

To be forged by FOSATU  
 To be saluted by CCAWUSA  
 To struggle in CUSA  
 What a march  
 Of people's congresses  
 To come!...

Racist Racist Racist  
 Wake up!..

We can discover  
 The pride of Africa  
 Covered by the sand dunes  
 Of history  
 Covered by the sand dunes  
 Of exploitation...

Racist wake up! 33

or Malange's FIRST MAY 1985:

Who among the oppressed workers can fail to imagine this day?

Who among the workers who are faced with retrenchment and hunger

Can fail to acknowledge it?

This day is the International Labour Day

Its story rolls up out of the ocean...

The cry then was for an end of exploitation...

Today 1st May 1985 in South Africa

Millions of workers are out of employment

Millions of workers are facing retrenchment

Millions of people are dying of hunger

This is the day that workers must reorganize themselves,

This is the day for unification of the working class,  
 from unskilled to artisan

This is the day that worker organizations must unite and pass  
 A resolution:

"That from this date, May 1st 1985, there will be no  
 FOSATU

No CCAWUSA - no GWU no FOOD AND CANNING - no

SAAWU no CUSA

All worker organizations must come together as one and  
 fight the bosses"... 34

The above poems foreground a political message to such an extent, that they emerge as a medium of powerful ideological indoctrination rather than aesthetic creation. The worker poems in fact often throw off any semblance to poetry altogether and dissolve into purely declarative statement - especially in the case of the last seven quoted lines of FIRST MAY 1985. Even the slightest of poetic rhythms would grind to a halt in the face of this army of acronyms and staccato utterances.

Sole defends this aesthetic deficiency in their poetry, saying that the "black working class in South Africa has... had less resources and leisure time to indulge in self-conscious cultural creation of the more 'literary sort'. On the other hand, many black petty bourgeois artists in this country are employed in jobs that either assist, or leave an opportunity for, their artistic activity"<sup>35</sup>. But both Hlatshwayo and Malange clearly make their ideological intentions known as regards the objectives of worker poetry: "we are involved in this, however hard it is for us after work, because we believe that our struggle is not only there to destroy the oppressive powers that control us. It is there also to build a new world. To do this, we must begin now...At this stage, for every black worker who picks up a pencil and forgets about the bottle, there is a victory."<sup>36</sup>

It may be seen how the ideological approach's foregrounding of the materialist factors, which shape and limit artistic production, leaves a gaping void in any evaluation of Soweto poetry's diversity of political, ideological and artistic spectrums. Only an overtly declarative "worker style" is considered effective by the ideological approach critics, and they ignore the

Soweto poetry which is more subtle or "bourgeois" in tone. They also ignore the interplay between ideology and art in Soweto poetry, favouring a clear demarcation between the two. In terms of the two evaluative distinctions of the introduction, therefore, the ideological division, of petit-bourgeois and worker poetry, imposes external categories on the text and favours a specific (Marxist-Leninist) ideology to the exclusion of all others. The approach's methodology is consequently found to be inadequate in both these evaluative distinctions.

### III

#### Stylistic and Ideological interplay

Mzamane has argued that "art for art's sake" is dead and that Soweto poets are poets in the service of the revolution, who "have the function of articulating the people's aspirations, sustaining their spirits and generally working in line with the liberation movements. Revolutionary poets do not feel artistically stifled by this... such poets are looked up to by members of their community, whether the misleading Western enemy critic likes this or not, they are listened to."<sup>37</sup> Mzamane, like the other critics in this chapter who have argued an ideological approach, evaluates Soweto poetry by its political propaganda content. This evaluation seeks a clearly presented and assertive ideological message, such as the one found in the new worker poetry - for example, The Tears Of A Creator:

...We say:

Let your hands deliver us from exploitation

Let our freedom be borne

Let our democracy be borne  
 Let our new nation be borne

COSATU

Stand up now with dignity

March forward

We are raising our clenched fists behind you

Behind us

We call into line

Our ancestors in struggle...

Here it rolls ahead

To settle account with the oppressors

To settle account with the exploiters

Here it is: COSATU...

Woe unto you oppressor

Woe unto you exploiter <sup>38</sup>...

But what of poetry that incorporates protest without resorting to propaganda invective? Can there not be an interplay between stylistic and ideological concerns? Brutus, for instance, says his poetry "functions as protest; it has the effect of protest. But I think it's poetry and not protest; it's not propaganda. The politics is not imported into it."<sup>39</sup> Mphahlele and Nkosi have also stressed that racial conflict and protest themes, to the exclusion of any attempt at literary creation, indeed weakens the ideological message in poetry.<sup>40</sup> Ideological critics, however, remain adamant that if the poet's class and style of writing are petit-bourgeois, then the poetry fails in its objective - Soweto poetry must take the direction of the liberation struggle.

The above argument emphasizes the need for wide ideological dissemination, even if it be at the expense of any interplay

with aesthetics; for example, Patel says that there "is nothing perverse in that the majority of the contemporary black poets have consciously jettisoned the inhibiting concept of art for art's sake. In a revolutionary situation the poet has no desire to be shackled by liberal aesthetics."<sup>41</sup> Patel nevertheless fails to see the "shackles" of ideological jargon, and how it steers sharply away from literary creation by its stock phrases such as "politically oppressed", "economically exploited", "socially segregated", "white domination" and "subjugation".<sup>42</sup> Soweto poetry, on the other hand, can incorporate protest without blatant canvassing - there is often stylistic and ideological interplay, as may be seen in the work of Christopher van Wyk or Njabulo Ndebele.

In Christopher van Wyk's In Detention, the protest against absurd media reports is articulated without any overpowering propaganda message. By cleverly interweaving a number of mutations of a report regarding a black detainee's death, all sense is eventually lost. The South African frame of reference makes the poem accessible to non intellectuals - it does not confine itself to members of the petit-bourgeoisie, as the ideological critics would argue:

...He slipped on the ninth floor while washing  
 He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
 He hung from the ninth floor  
 He washed from the ninth floor while slipping  
 He hung from a piece of soap while washing

(ll 10-14)

This poem serves as a good example of how poetry may be used to contribute to a political statement's force through stylistic

and ideological interplay. Much of the worker poetry is overshadowed by the central fixation on protest, but in the Soweto poetry of van Wyk's In Detention poetic form has made the message concise and powerful. As André Brink has pointed out, "Within the context of a situation like the one in South Africa writing can, and does, become effective as a revolutionary act in its own, peculiar, right."<sup>43</sup>

Another example of Soweto poetry with stylistic and ideological interplay is Njabulo Ndebele's The Revolution of the Aged. This poem's political "message" is that the wisdom and patience of the aged is more effective than "the young/ who burn ( ) with scorn/loaded with revolutionary maxims/ hot for quick results" (ll 19-22). Ndebele's poem uses the image of a flute, which represents black freedom that was stolen by the white man: "how i cleaned his house!/ how i washed his clothes/ and polished his shoes!/ but he would not give me back my flute" (ll 39-42). But the poem also moves from a deceptively passive "petit-bourgeois" beginning, to an apocalyptic conclusion, which is characteristic of all "resistance poetry" and accessible to all "classes" : "do not eat an unripe apple/ its bitterness is a tingling knife./ suffer yourself to wait/ and the ripeness will come / and the apple will fall down at your feet./ now is the time/ pluck the apple/ and feed the future with its ripeness."(ll 54-61).

Soweto poets thus adapt their art form to encompass the ideological and political sphere, but **abstain** from making their poetry merely a reflection of the "revolutionary path". In other

words, they see their rôle in a wider social context than the worker poets. The latter only identify with socio-political problems through the over-worked themes of race relations or the liberation struggle - they tend not to alter their perspective by artistic creation, for they feel that art can only restrict the choice of audience.<sup>44</sup> It has been shown how critics of the ideological approach commend this aesthetic vacuum in worker poetry, discarding the relatively more creative or imaginative Soweto poetry as petit-bourgeois and consequently of no social relevance. This biased evaluation overlooks the complex spectrum of pluralized mergings of Soweto poetry and ideology. As Mphahlele has observed:

throughout the history of literature committed to social causes, the poet has taken up positions of protest, indignation, unrelieved anger, contempt, prophecy and so on. These positions themselves suggest relative degrees and angles of intensity , and an intricate pattern of distances between writer and the authority he attacks, writer and community, community and authority.<sup>45</sup>

The ideological approach, however, fails to progress beyond a social model comprising a number of universal opposites, such as petit-bourgeois and worker. Their evaluation of Soweto poetry is thus inadequate, as it does not address the poetry's aesthetic and stylistic adaptations of ideological dogma. Such omissions would contravene the second distinction of the introduction.

## NOTES

3. The Ideological Approach

1. See E. Ngara Art and Ideology in the African Novel p.7.
2. L. Nkosi op cit p.163.
3. S. Sepamla op cit p.24.
4. P. Horn "We All Sat Round a Faia" in Dead in One's Own Lifetime: Art in Apartheid Society, p.101.
5. *ibid* pp.102-3(my emphasis).
6. *ibid* p.93.
7. *ibid* pp.93,105.
8. K. Sole "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions" in op cit p.74(my emphasis).
9. K. Sole "Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948-1960" in op cit p.25.
10. K. Sole "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions" in op cit p.73.
11. K. Sole "The Abortion of the Intellect" in Dead in One's Own Lifetime: Art in Apartheid Society, p.90.
12. K. Sole "Prejudiced Approach" in Contrast no.46 Dec 1978, p.90.
13. M. Gwala in R. Royston (ed) op cit p.57.
14. M. Mzamane(ed) Serote: Selected Poems pp.17-18.
15. *ibid* p.31.
16. *ibid* p.55.
17. *ibid* p.52.
18. *ibid* p.65 (my emphasis).
19. M. Vaughan "Ideological Directions in the Study of Southern African Literature" in op cit p.41.
20. See K. Sole "Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948-1960 in op cit p.2. See also P. Horn "We All Sat Round A Faia " in op cit p.99.
21. P. Horn *ibid* p.96.

22. *ibid* p.99
23. A. Sitas (ed) Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle.
24. J. Cronin "The law that says/constricts the breath-line(...). South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970's in *op cit* p.44.
25. See chapter 2 "The Politicizing Approach" 28n.
26. K. Sole "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions" in *op cit* p.66. The "opposition group" Sole refers to are the aspirant black bourgeoisie, which he accuses of seeking "power and wealth ...at the expense of the 'ordinary black people' it claims to represent"; See K. Sole "Identities and Priorities in Recent Black Literature and Performance: A Preliminary Investigation" in Paper no.22 of the Economic Development and Racial Domination Conference at U.W.C. Oct 8-10 1984 p.14.
27. K. Sole "Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948-60" in *op cit* pp.28-29.
28. Sole contradicts himself here by stating that critics should go further than "monolithic causal explanations" to explain art's "multifaceted existence", and yet he says the focus should be narrowed to economic, political and social factors. The same contradiction exists on pp.48-49.
29. K. Sole "The Abortion Of The Intellect" in *op cit* p.91.
30. O. Mtshali in R. Royston (ed) *op cit* p.86.
31. M. Bowra "Poetry and Politics 1900-61" quoted in A.G. Ulliyat "Dilemmas In Black Poetry" in *op cit* p.54 (my emphasis).
32. K. Sole "Identities And Priorities In Recent Black Literature And Performance: A Preliminary Investigation" in *op cit* pp.33-34.
33. Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo in A. Sitas (ed) *op cit* pp.39-40.
34. Nise Malange *ibid* p.61.

- 35.K.Sole "Identities And Priorities In Recent Black Literature And Performance: A Preliminary Investigation" in op cit p.30.
- 36.M.Hlatshwayo and N.Malange quoted in A.Sitas(ed) op cit p.6.
- 37.M.Mzamane "Literature and Politics Among Blacks in South Africa" in op cit pp.55-56.
- 38.M.Hlatshwayo in A.Sitas(ed) op cit pp.53-54(my emphasis).
- 39.Quoted in U.A.Barnett op cit p.90.
- 40.D.B.Mtuli "Writers in shackles?" in C.Malan(ed) op cit p.133. See also G.Haresnape "A Question Of Black And White? : The Contemporary Situation In South African English Poetry" in P.Wilhelm and J.A.Polley(eds) op cit p.46.
- 41.E.Patel "Towards Revolutionary Poetry" in M.J.Daymond et al(eds) op cit p.83.
- 42.E.Patel uses each of these terms on p.83 ibid.
- 43.A.Brink Mapmakers:Writing In A State Of Siege p.151.
- 44.P.A.Egejuru Black Writers:White Audience feels that the choice of language ultimately qualifies the choice of audience pp.14-15.See also J.P.Sartre What is Literature? p.52.
45. E.Mphahlele "Mongane Serote's Odyssey:the path that breaks the heels" in op cit p.77 (my emphasis).See also L.Nkosi Home and Exile and Other Selections p.114.

## 4. THE LINGUISTIC APPROACH

## I

Western evaluative criteria

In The Criticism of Modern Literature, Irele effectively sums up the dilemma facing critics using the linguistic approach:

The terms of reference of evaluating modern African literature are being provided at the moment by the critical tradition which has grown up alongside Western literature. The problem now is to apply them without either frustrating our writers and stultifying the development of a vigorous movement among us; or, on the other hand, by excessive indulgence in encouraging second-rate work and condemning our literature for ever to a minor position. This is a dilemma which the critic has to resolve.<sup>1</sup>

Irele is of course addressing the difficulty of imposing a Western methodology, such as the "practical criticism" of I.A. Richards or the equally conservative approaches of F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot, on recent black literature. Western criticism, from the time of F.R. Leavis, has used as its critical tools a number of culturally conservative criteria based upon very specific Western elitist models. Leavis, for instance, in his article "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture" (1930), used as his models: Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire and Hardy, to name but a few. Leavis believed that critics and true artists were a minority, and that upon them depended the power of future civilization to profit "by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth

more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there." (p.15). In this article, Leavis also quotes I.A. Richards' opinion regarding the rôle of the critic: "To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values." (p.14). Chaphole's first question, outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, is whether these Eurocentric values are appropriate for Soweto poetry.

Nadine Gordimer is one of the linguistic critics who accepts Western literary conventions as universal. In her book, The Black Interpreters, Gordimer argues that "poetry as a last resort"<sup>2</sup> is not necessarily good poetry. She also states that if poetry is not of a high literary standard, it should not be written: "There is the opinion - which I do not share - that the discouraging hurdle of high literary standard may wither awkward, tentative talent in the bud. But there is no special pleading in the world of the arts - you overcome, and create, or you are not admitted. It's as simple - and hard - as that",<sup>3</sup> Gordimer's arguments presuppose that an established set of Western evaluative criteria are applicable to South African literature. This assumption is problematic, as the Soweto poet is using and adapting a borrowed literary tradition and language in an attempt to articulate a black experience<sup>4</sup>. In a poem such as Mtshali's RIDE UPON THE DEATH CHARIOT, the cultural borrowings and detours alone would be impossible to evaluate with only the western critical tools of the "Great Tradition".

Another problem in Gordimer's evaluative criteria is that pitting the West against Africa often reverts to a bitter

white vs black polemic. In John Tucker's essay "Poetry before protest", for instance, the poetry of Sally Bryer is given as the model for black protest poets bent on anger and resentment.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Essop Patel says that "Black poetry, today, is dynamic and alive (unlike white English poetry which is comatose)"<sup>6</sup>. Black poets, such as Gwala and Mtshali also reject Western evaluative criteria, arguing that there is no pure language or "correct English". It is through poetry Gwala says:

that you find, most soberly, that there has never been such a thing as pure language. That only academic fallacy can create and defend such abstraction. You thus cannot but be disturbed by academics who claim an almost sacerdotal authority over black writing...South African whites can no more claim exclusive rights to correct English. The English language itself thrives on the adoption of foreign words and coinages. Besides, colonization and the imposed separation of races has taken care of what happens here. In our ghetto language there can be no fixity. The words we use belong to certain periods of our history.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of Serres' thought, Gwala's argument would be correct - there is no universal clear-cut distinction between black and white English usage, especially in the culturally diverse situation in South Africa. It would consequently be unjust to pontificate on how Soweto poetry does not favourably compare with Shakespeare or Donne.

Western literary critics, who argue that Soweto poetry loses sight of accepted criteria, are thus faced with the difficult question "criteria accepted by whom?"<sup>8</sup> If "standard English"

and its accompanying "Great Tradition" is frequently not applicable to white South African poets, how can it be successfully imposed on black South Africans? This dilemma remains unsolved at present, and the usual "escape route" for frustrated linguistic critics of Soweto poetry, is to dispose of it under a futile catalogue of "common themes". Gordimer herself reverts to this practice, which will be discussed in part III of this chapter.

Douglas Livingstone, like Gordimer, attempts to evaluate Soweto poetry solely with Western literary criteria. He feels that:

"special treatment" in so far as critical standards being lowered or dropped altogether because a) the poet is Black, or b) because his work is on the side of the sociological and political angels, is not really valid.

Poetry in English, in Africa, must be judged fairly ... by internationally established yardsticks. If the poetry is powerful enough and causes those same yardsticks to change - so much the better! - but we still have some distance to go in this direction...<sup>9</sup>

The "internationally established yardsticks" Livingstone adopts are so culture-bound to the West, that the unique position of black South African "new poetry" could only be evaluated as deficient. Furthermore, the political message in the poetry is an integral part of its form - Soweto poetry often revolves around social disequilibrium and discontent, and, therefore, the poetry cannot be evaluated without placing it in its wider social context.

Livingstone's approach, however, is Formalistic, with composition, rhythm, metrics and style<sup>10</sup> being the only critical tools. As a result, he argues for the autonomy or universality of the art form, at the ultimate expense of the wider social context - the social rôle of Soweto poetry. It has already been argued how Serres rejects universals, such as "art" and "politics", as delimitations, but for Livingstone art and politics are watertight compartments and he believes that poems with the "'rat-tat-tat' of machine guns, or telling Whitey to go and get stitched",<sup>11</sup> as a theme will not endure as art:

Perhaps the toughest definition of a poet is: a man who has been dead for 100 years, and one of his works is still read. The Art of Craft is a demanding one, like any other. The artifact has to be well-worked and chiselled with all the artist's talent, integrity and power to survive the harsh glacier of time... Immediate emotion carelessly displayed as a sort of slapdash advert for this or that writer's sensibility will die the death, I'm afraid.<sup>12</sup>

Livingstone's argument about endurance may be correct, as Soweto poetry relates directly to a prevailing system of government. If removed from this socio-historical context, the poetry will be lacking in impact. For example, van Wyk's In Detention is an effective satirical attack on the present media controls, but, if placed in a different context in the future, it will be incomprehensible and require explanatory foot-notes.<sup>13</sup> Revolutionary literature that depends on its immediate context may thus be reduced to irrelevancy. As Rive has pointed out, "Whether the writers in South Africa feel they must protest or the protesters feel they must write is not relevant in the South African context. It is sufficient to realise that poetry

that hammers away too hard at the message defeats its own purpose and becomes merely a listing of grievances interspersed with shrieks for revenge. If the poetry is to last, indeed if any form of creativity is to last and be meaningful, it must go deeper and beyond any special pleading at any particular time."<sup>14</sup> What Livingstone and Rive fail to address, are the multifaceted linguistic dilemmas which face the Soweto poet's creativity. No universal evaluative criteria take cognizance of these dilemmas, or of the intricate and continual displacements of politics and art in Soweto poetry,

The cause of the above dilemmas is obviously language: "The black poet has to determine how he is going to make imaginative and meaningful use of a centuries-old, culturally-enriched language in the culturally relatively underdeveloped environment in which he finds himself...how can the poet make a creative use of a language to which he has no cultural ties?"<sup>15</sup> A Soweto poet, such as Mtshali, would argue that "creative use" is not a prerequisite, as the revolutionary climate does not demand the luxuries of writing about "bees, birds and flowers."<sup>16</sup> It is only "revolutionary" romanticism which abounds in Soweto poetry - Western literary conventions are rejected together with universal questions of human existence. These are unimportant and result in the poet's identity with the ruling discourse he is attempting to leave. In other words, Soweto poets use the "craft of English" by either adapting it, until it loses its traditional character, or leaving it out altogether.

Livingstone points out that the correct usage of the craft of English is "easily swamped by the tempting facilities of the

political pamphleteer - a short-lived and grubby calling, and a sorry one for a poet to descend to,"<sup>17</sup> but he misses the actual reasoning behind the Soweto poets' militant attitude towards the "craft of English". Their neglect of rhyme, free verse, rhythm and structure (to name but a few of Livingstone's poetic qualities) only weakens the aesthetic impact in terms of the clear and preconceived Western criteria, which they wish to avoid anyway. To the Soweto poets the aesthetic quality of a poem can be sacrificed if it is silencing the real black voice. The situation is poignantly expressed by Césaire when he says that "it is no use painting the foot of the tree white, the strength of the bark cries out from beneath the paint..."<sup>18</sup>

It is thus problematic to use Western critical tools on poetry which is written in an attempt to free itself of those very culture-bound literary conventions. Mutloatse, for example, says that he and other black writers are "going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say."<sup>19</sup> There is a need, then, for an evaluation which can address the poet's anguish in attempting to formulate a pure "black aesthetic". This anguish is evident in much of Soweto poetry; for instance, Serote's Black Bells depicts the frustration and futility in using English to find a black aesthetic:

AND  
 words,  
 Make pain,  
 Like poverty can make pain.  
 Words,

WORDS,

Like thought, are elusive,

Like life,

Where everybody is trapped.

I wonder who trapped me,

For I am trapped

Twice,

Like,

a word can mean two things,

Who.and Whitey

Trapped me.

I read.

Words,

WORDS.

Trying to get out

Words.words.By Whitey.

No.No.No.By Whitey.

I know I'm trapped.

Helpless

Hopeless

Trapped me whitey.Meem wanna ge aot Fuc

Pschwee e ep boobooduboooodu blllll

Black books,

Flesh blood words shitrerr Haai,

Amen. 20

Leavis and the "Great Tradition" would frown upon such poetry. This literary rejection does not necessarily reflect a weakness in the poem, but rather the inadequacy of Western evaluative criteria to assess Soweto poetry and all its unique cultural peculiarities (such as the influence of South Africa's cosmopolitan society). The critical inadequacy stems from its reliance upon established "universal" notions of value - Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, Donne etc. - which are used as an empirical measuring tool. As regards Serres' critical distinctions, the assumption that a "frozen" universal model existed would be

found to be misleading and limiting, especially concerning the cultural assimilation and adaptations<sup>21</sup> inherent in Soweto poetry.

Western evaluative criteria can thus easily become pitfalls for the linguistic critic, because the criteria encourage a simplified polarization<sup>22</sup> between so-called "good" and "bad", or "white vs black" models. As stated earlier, linguistic critics escape from having to make this value judgement, by itemizing the "common themes" of Soweto poetry - Gordimer, Alvarez-Pereyre and van Niekerk all resort to this practice. Livingstone also indulges in these generalizations; he classifies the work of Mtshali, Serote and Sepamla under the headings of: "Filial Devotion", "Piety", "a strong sense of community", "Humour", "Anger" and "a lack of, or weakness in form, language or structure."<sup>23</sup> The only linguistic critic who does not adopt this "common themes" methodology is Jeremy Cronin. He attempts to adapt the linguistic model.

## II

### Adapting the model

Before the efficacy of Cronin's sophisticated linguistic model is discussed, it will be necessary to briefly survey the Soweto poets' adaptations of literary conventions. It will be argued that adapting the critical model is futile, for the medium itself is continually in a state of metamorphosis. As a result, any adaptation in critical methodology, which is based on a notion of some static literary convention, must itself become outdated. As Serres points out, the new explica-

tion is only "an archaic and vague approximation."<sup>24</sup>

In the introduction, Chaphole's second question dealt with how to change the critical model to handle new literature that showed the influences of both African and Western traditions. Such a literature is found in Soweto poetry. Mphahlele has observed how Mazisi Kunene, for instance, first writes in the vernacular and then translates into English. This increases the capacity of the vernacular "to absorb new ideas, new literary structures, new metaphors and symbolism."<sup>25</sup> The title of Mphahlele's article "Prometheus in Chains", is itself an example of how a Eurocentric myth has been adapted to a South African frame of reference.<sup>26</sup>

Mtshali is another poet who writes in Zulu, to "establish his identity",<sup>27</sup> while changing to English for the real articulation of his experience. Mtshali, however, alters this English to accommodate the "language of urgency". As he says, "the English that we use in our poetry is not the Queen's language that you know as written by say Wordsworth and Coleridge. It is the language of urgency which we use ... We have not... the time to embellish... with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments like rhyme, iambic pentameter, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style."<sup>28</sup> Mtshali is joined by Gwala, yet another Soweto poet who has adapted Western literary convention. In Staffrider, Gwala has used township idiom<sup>29</sup> interspersed with English.

What may be concluded from this brief survey of Soweto poets, therefore, is that their own literary models are continually

evolving. If this literary evolution is coupled with the multi-faceted cultural mix in South Africa, a very distorted model - if any model at all - emerges. This literary pandemonium is best described by Moyana, when he says that South Africa is:

built upon the principle of bastardization: the ruling Boers speak Afrikaans unrecognizable by speakers of the original Dutch...there are Africans that can speak no African language at all; and others who are so alienated from their traditional cultures that they search desperately for literary heroes with whom they can identify. In the compounds of the mining towns one meets a diverse congregation of peoples from all over Southern Africa, with no common language of their own, but communicating through an obscene tongue called Kitchen-Kaffir, developed in the master-servant dealings of Boers and their black workers.<sup>30</sup>

With such a combination of cultural and literary factors, it would be a formidable task to argue the application of any new linguistic model - Jeremy Cronin, however, attempts to do just this.

Cronin believes that the point of entry into black poetry is "through a consideration of language and oppression in South Africa."<sup>31</sup> He uses formal analysis to understand the content of Serote's Hell, Well, Heaven - thus inverting the order of Marxist critics<sup>32</sup> who study the poem's content to understand the form. Cronin isolates Serote's interjections, dividing them into five groups: "Context dependency", "Phonetic expressiveness", "Relationship to referential words", "Phonetic eccentricity", and "Syntactic eccentricity". He then goes on to illustrate how the poem's interjections are a deliberate artistic intention. Cronin goes into minute detail explaining at length how, for

instance, the "intensity of exhalation in uttering an interjection will...relate to the degree of intensity with which the emotion is felt", and how, "a long drawn out H-E-L-L, will have a somewhat different significance from a more quickly completed version."<sup>33</sup> The focus on interjections implies that Serote's poem is accessible through a narrow and limited linguistic perspective. This critical model also serves as a means by which Cronin's own assumptions may be forced onto the poem - as illustrated by his subjective explication of the word "Heavens": "The first 'Heavens' would seem to approach a weary, if emphatic, sigh, with slowed tempo; whereas the context of the second demands a more upbeat intonation, assertive exhalation, faster tempo and, perhaps, a wry, throw-away tone colouring."<sup>34</sup>

Such a linguistic model becomes pure conjecture when Serote's use of the expletive is analysed in What's in this Black 'Shit'. For Cronin, expletives are "associated with structured and fairly complex skills, and they are very far from evidencing merely trendy sensationalism."<sup>35</sup> Ulliyat, however, has pointed out that the insertion of expletives may indeed only amount to a lack of artistic control and easy sensationalism.<sup>36</sup> The question arises, therefore, as to whether Cronin's oversophisticated critical approach, and his rigorous evaluations, are not aimed at a level well above Serote's actual artistic intention. Cronin's critical tools clearly belong to a technically linguistic Western environment, and no amount of adaptation to the South African context will conceal his endeavour to isolate units of the poem and limit their meaning or interpretation.

Like the linguistic critics that Scholes speaks of, Cronin is "putting poetry on the rack and forcing

it to yield up its secrets, or even worse to confess falsely."<sup>38</sup>

The central deficiency in Cronin's linguistic model is that it avoids the periphery of Soweto poetry by imposing a reading grid based entirely on one factor - interjections. The model assumes a closed totality in each Soweto poem, leaving little or no room for evaluative criteria beyond linguistic, phonetic and grammatical elements. In so doing, the methodology violates the entire second evaluative distinction of Serres - Cronin does not allow for a multiplicity of levels within and without the poem, and there is no evaluative panoramic overview. Cronin's model can in fact only operate if it excludes rather than includes anything but the static object or interjection. As a result, any metamorphosis in the poetry is overlooked and even if Cronin does attempt to expand his focus, his argument descends to the level of conjecture. For example, after providing his evidence for "Context dependency" and "Phonetic expressiveness" in Serote's HELL, WELL, HEAVEN, he admits his uncertainty in the section "The relationship of interjections to referential words," when he says that there are, "in descending order of likelihood, three possible readings for 'Hell!'",<sup>39</sup> If Cronin's linguistic model with its novel adaptations is inadequate in assessing Soweto poetry, it is necessary to examine whether a return to modified Western standards would succeed.

## III

Which critical tools ?

In the introduction, Chaphole's third question addressed the option of modifying and supplementing the tools of the "Great Tradition". It has been shown how developing brand new standards (Chaphole's second question) was problematic as the Soweto poets were already adapting existing Western literary models; this ruled out the formulation of a "pure" black aesthetic. Critics, however, have used a "common themes" model in an attempt to find this aesthetic. This critical model operates by breaking down Soweto poetry into recurrent themes in the hope that some common denominator or black aesthetic will emerge. Gordimer, Alvarez-Pereyre and van Niekerk all resort to this model, but it will be argued, with various examples of Soweto poetry, that this model is also deficient - the thematic concerns of Soweto poetry are too diverse and inconsistent to be of any use as a reliable critical tool.

In The Black Interpreters, Gordimer states that the "themes chosen by the new black poets are committed in the main to the individual struggle for physical and spiritual survival under oppression."<sup>40</sup> She goes on to explain how the new Soweto poets selected an urban theme for the formulation of their "resentments against apartheid". Within this urban theme, Gordimer finds three stations: "distortion of values by submission to whites; rejection of distortion; black/white polarity - opposition on new ground."<sup>41</sup> This simplification of the multifarious themes found in Soweto poetry is a contradiction of Gordimer's earlier position, where she emphasized the difficulty of finding any common denominator in South

## Africa:

We have no common language, and we have, of course, no ethnic kinship, but, on the contrary, a constant redefinition... We have no common frame of political thought, but a clash of bitterly opposed ideologies. As for fear of a common foe - the foe we fear is each other...<sup>42</sup>

Like Gordimer, Alvarez-Pereyre attempts to find "General Characteristics" in Soweto poetry. After dividing the poetry into: "A poetry that informs", "A poetry that accuses" and "A poetry that warns and exhorts"<sup>43</sup>, he proceeds to find the common themes within these strands. The common themes Alvarez-Pereyre selects are: "The rejection of the ivory tower"; "The rejection of banalities"; "The rejection of the fabricated image and hypocrisy"; and "The rejection of the status quo".<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note that, although all these themes are "common", each critic discovers different themes in Soweto poetry. This illustrates the futility in trying to find a coherent line of thought in a poetry largely based upon vague notions of Black Consciousness and cultural identity.

A.S. van Niekerk is another critic who relies on the "common themes" approach. His point of entry, however, is from the perspective of theology. van Niekerk explores Christianity's rôle and impact in the works of Mtshali, Serote, Gwala and Sepamla.<sup>45</sup> The theological critique ignores the fact that Soweto poets, such as Sepamla and Mtshali, reject Western Christianity; for instance, Sepamla said: "religion tends to make my head giddy. On the one hand are the many teachings and divergent practices of Christianity. On the other are vague outlines of my ancestors' ways."<sup>46</sup> Once the works of the

four Soweto poets are analysed, van Niekerk assesses the "Basic thought patterns" of these poets. Yet again these are found to be different from those of Gordimer and Alvarez-Pereyre. van Niekerk's common themes are: "Blackness"; "Cyclical Time"; "The Mother"; "The Father"; "God"; "The City"; and "Past, Present And Future."<sup>47</sup>

The main deficiency in the "common themes" approach of all these critics is that it presupposes a uniformity amongst Soweto poets. This is a myth which has been disproved both in the politicizing and ideological approaches. As Rive observes:

A writer creating in his own small corner, must of necessity have an approach different from another in another small corner, depending on who he is, where he is, and what he is writing. Different stimuli must produce different responses...

In fact the exciting thing about Africa is its rich diversity; its difference, its lack of a common factor...There is no common denominator in subject matter, material or treatment...<sup>48</sup>

The "common themes" approach cannot possibly represent the myriad of styles evident in Soweto poetry. In order to further illustrate the multifarious nature of this poetry and its expression, it will now be necessary to draw upon a representative cross-section of Soweto poetry and examine the ways in which it has been articulated. It will be shown that, although the poetry was written around the same time (1970's and early 80's), it does not form a consistent or coherent whole, but rather a diverse and fragmented stream of consciousness.

Certain Soweto poets in the early 1980's such as Farouk Stemmet

and Dikobe Martins, reflect the suppression of their art form - the silencing of their "voice". (It should be noted here that the terms "voice", "cry", "chant", "spirit of Africa" and "Black aesthetic" are virtually interchangeable in the poems to be discussed). These terms deal with what would be called the "Muse" in European poetry. The Muse in this instance is Black Consciousness, as articulated in the poetry of Black Africa's liberation struggle. This Muse's voice is suppressed but still exists. The "voice" of Africa thus finds definition in its pain, and a poem, such as Achmat Dangor's The Voices that are Dead, is a good example of this expression of pain caused by suppressors: "Oh, my brothers -/ you too are dead,/ your voices rage barrenly/ within the august halls/ of the doomed" (ll 35-39).

Dangor's Silence of the Rocks, however, is an example of how the silencing of poetry (by banning orders, etc.) has in turn created new poetry, which expresses the pain of this silencing as its theme: "The wind laments/ that I no longer/ sing with the/ lyrical voice of the poet...Let the wind, then too,/ go into the ghettos/ of my kind,/ and listen to the silence" (ll 33-45). The reader cannot help associating the "silence" of this poem with the first black silenced poets, exiled during the 1950's and early 60's, also found in Dangor's The Voices that are Dead : "Mattera, Mohapi, Mathe,/ Nortje, Nakasa/ and you Brutus,/ names and voices/ that few remember"(ll 12-16). The silenced Soweto poets of the 1980's are only new voices, but nothing has changed as regards Black Consciousness suppression: "from the ashes something stirs,/ new voices are being heard... new voices sing new songs/ yet still the morning rises/ As if

drenched in blood./ Oh Lord, save them /from the gunfire/ and the jackboot"(ll 57-67).

On the other hand, the voice of Africa finds different expression in the theme of Pitika Ntuli's The Face: "From these narrow confines/ The voices I hear/ Are whips on my back" (ll 19-21). The "voice" in this poem is the voice of the struggle. In the two aforementioned poems, however, the expression of the black Muse or Black Consciousness was associated with the theme of hopeless pain, but now encompasses an active political struggle: "The voice/ And the echo/ Which is the voice repeating/ The cry of my people's struggle... (ll 28-31). The expression of the struggle also finds a place as the theme of Lindiwe Mvemve's The Rustle In That Tall Dry Grass: "the rustle in that tall dry grass/ the revolver/ the cry of the bird/ in the tall naked tree/ struggling / and the groan to liberate..."(ll 1-7).

Yet another variation in theme is Muhammad Ruddin's Azanian Love Song. This poem uses the inspirational and futuristic theme of "Azania", and stresses the freedom of black expression. The freedom is personified in the clichéd "child of deliverance". The child's birth represents the birth of freedom of expression and rebellion against white supremacy: "somewhere in a dark sanctuary/I hear the sound of a Freedom Song:/The Child has risen/ and walks defiantly / towards the lion's lair/ undaunted, unafraid..."( ll 18-23).

A further variation in the expression of Soweto poetry, is

that which passively exposes disequilibrium in South African society. These poems are very different from those of so-called "resistance poetry", in that the expository poems make their statement and conclude without any implicit or explicit "resistance". The poems explore such issues as the cyclic nature of suppression and the racist government of South Africa.

The theme of the cyclic nature of suppression is best exemplified by Es'kia Mphahlele's Fathers and Sons. The poem illustrates how first the father and then the son are incarcerated by the same white society: "Fifteen years ago/ they dragged me out at dawn/ blindfolded me and shot me,/ then-/ eternity wrapped me up/ in my dazzling blackness/ now you see I have returned..." (ll 1-8). The phoenix-like return is of course the arrest of the executed father's son: "All I know is that I'm fifteen years of age/ is that I feel the prison's cold vermin/crashing over me and nibbling on my heart/is that already I have seen the voltage/ in the fences of the law"(ll 28-32). The realisation that "bluestone eyes" was the same man who had shot his father completes the cycle: "and now my heart is telling me -/ that man with bluestone eyes/ has got to have been there at dawn"(ll 48-50).

Asvat's The Solitaire, on the other hand, uses poetic technique to expose Black Consciousness in "...a peaceful state/ Secured by soldiers in the street"(ll 17-18). Asvat depicts a family under house arrest, but it is his poetic technique which adds to the impact of the political message; namely, its use of alliteration in the first line: "captive cabined caged"(ll).

This device is effective in equating a human being with a caged animal. The state of unrest is not restricted to house arrest, however, and Ben J. Langa's For My Brothers (Mandla and Bheki) in Exile illustrates the theme of family separation or disunity. Langa's poem perhaps best exemplifies the non-revolutionary, or passive character, of the poetry in this section: "In all our pain and agony we rejoice,/ For the tensile steel of our souls/Transcends borders and boundaries./ However far apart our bodies may be/ Our souls are locked together in perpetual embrace"(ll 65-69). The contrast between this concluding stanza and that of a so-called "apocalyptic" poet such as Ndebele or Gwala, is immediately evident. In the latter poetry, the last line of the poem is the place for the most reactionary thematic statement, whereas Langa's last lines speak of joy and strength in the face of enforced exile.

Essop Patel's They came at Dawn is Soweto poetry in its most passive form. Patel's theme is the confiscation of black protest literature: "They came at dawn/ they left at dusk/ taking a poem/written / on a bronze autumn leaf,/ written / in the shadow of bars,/ as evidence/ for a banning order"(ll 15-23). Christopher van Wyk's Injustice is also passive but his theme is entirely different to Patel's. The theme of Injustice is the horror of humanity at the injustices experienced in South Africa: "me, I cry easily if you're hurt/,...my dreams these days are policed/ by a million eyes that baton-charge my sleep/ and frog-march me into a/ shaken morning./ I can't get used to injustice./ I can't smile no matter what./ I'll never get used to nightmares/ but often I dream of freedom"(ll 14-22).

The above poems serve to illustrate the danger in attempting to find consistent thematic concerns in Soweto poetry. It has been shown how even poems which use the same metaphors to express Black Consciousness ("voice", "cry", "chant", "spirit of Africa" and "Black aesthetic") have either entirely different themes, or subtle variations on the same theme. The "common themes" approach of Gordimer, Alvarez-Pereyre and van Niekerk is consequently found to be inadequate in addressing the complex variation in the poetry. Their methodology imposes external categories upon the poem, thereby minimizing any adaptations or deviations from the set model. The second evaluative distinction of Serres is thus again transgressed by the linguistic approach.

## NOTES

4. The Linguistic Approach

1. A. Irele in C. Heywood (ed) Perspectives on African Literature, p.13.
2. N. Gordimer op cit p.53.
3. N. Gordimer "African Literature", a lecture given at U.C.T. February 1972 p.5.
4. See E. Mphahlele "Prometheus in Chains: The Fate of English in South Africa" in op cit p.90.
5. J. Tucker "Poetry before protest" in Contrast vol 11 no.1 Dec 1976 p.50.
6. E. Patel in M. J. Daymond et al (eds) op cit p.87.
7. M. Gwala in ibid pp.42,43,48. See also S. Gray op cit p.2.
8. As was the case with the Contrast 1977 comments: see U. A. Barnett op cit p.32.
9. D. Livingstone "The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and others in English: Notes towards a critical evaluation" in op cit p.51.
10. E. Ngara op cit defines a Formalist critic on pp.3-4.
11. D. Livingstone op cit p.59.
12. ibid p.51 see also p.62.
13. As is the case when Soweto poetry is published overseas.
14. R. Rive "The Black Man And White Literature" in New Classic (Special Issue) no.4, 1977, p.70. Rive was against using separate standards of criticism for black writers, and said they should be understood "in terms of universal creativity": see T. J. Couzens' review of Rive in A. Lennox-Short (ed) op cit, p.114.
15. A. G. Ulliyatt op cit p.51. It is interesting to note that Gwala attacks Ulliyatt's observations, in that they argue for a conventional English culture: see M. J. Daymond et al (eds) op cit p.49.

- 16.O.Mtshali quoted in M.Chapman(ed) Soweto Poetry p.110.
- 17.D.Livingstone op cit p.62.
- 18.A.Césaire quoted in F.Fanon op cit p.141.
- 19.M.Mutloatse Forced Landing p.5.
- 20.M.W.Serote in R.Royston (ed) op cit p.26.
- 21.S.Sepamla op cit argues that black poets and writers should adapt English to make it more effective as a black medium of communication.p.20.
- 22.See G.Haresnape's "A Question Of Black And White?:The Contemporary Situation In South African English Poetry" in P.Wilhelm and J.A.Polley(eds) op cit p.39.
- 23.D.Livingstone op cit p.61.
- 24.M.Serres in J.V.Harari and David F.Bell op cit p.37.
- 25.E.Mphahlele"Prometheus in Chains:The Fate of English in South Africa" in op cit pp.94-95.
- 26.ibid see p.97 where Mphahlele says that, like Shelley, he uses "Prometheus as a symbol of energy, passion for freedom, toughness of the human spirit."
- 27.O.Mtshali quoted in J.Alvarez-Pereyre op cit p.40.
- 28.O.Mtshali "Black Poetry in Southern Africa:What it means" in C.Heywood Aspects of South African Literature p.127.
- 29.As M.Vaughan points out in "Staffrider And Directions Within Contemporary South African Literature" in L.White and T.Couzens(eds) Literature And Society In South Africa, p.208.
- 30.T.Moyana "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa" in C.Heywood (ed) Aspects of South African Literature p.92
- 31.J.Cronin" 'The law that says/constricts the breath-line (...)' South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970's" in op cit p.26.
- 32.See E.Ngara's "Marxist Aesthetics and Stylistic Criticism" in op cit p.4.

- 33.J.Cronin "'The law that says/constricts the breath-line(...)'  
South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the  
1970's" in op cit p.33.
- 34.ibid p.35.
- 35.ibid p.41.
- 36.A.G.Ullyat "Dilemmas In Black Poetry" in op cit p.53.
- 37.A.Irele in C.Heywood(ed) Perspectives on African Literature  
p.13, has observed that criticism of African writers in  
general is often over-sophisticated and well above the  
writer's actual capability.
- 38.R.Scholes Structuralism in Literature p.22.
- 39.J.Cronin "'The law that says/constricts the breath-line  
(...)' South African English Language Poetry Written by  
Africans in the 1970's" in op cit p.36.
- 40.N.Gordimer The Black Interpreters p.54.
- 41.ibid p.55.
- 42.N.Gordimer "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa"  
(1961) in G.D.Killam (ed) p.34.
- 43.J.Alvarez-Pereyre op cit pp.251-254.
- 44.ibid pp.254-257.
- 45.A.S.van Niekerk Dominee, are you listening to the drums?  
p.37.
- 46.S.Sepamla "The Black Writer In South Africa Today:Problems  
And Dilemmas" in op cit p.24.
- 47.A.S.van Niekerk op cit pp.69-98.
- 48.R.Rive Selected Writings pp.72-73.

## 5. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND METHOD

In conclusion, it is submitted that the critical equipment used to assess Soweto poetry displays a limited perception of the poetry's diverse spectrum. Each methodology examined was shown to operate within its own circumscribed confines, and rarely addressed the outside periphery of cultural borrowings and cohabitations of thought in the poetry. Critical responses favoured a universal theory, which ignored the complex dynamic at work in Soweto poetry, and the multiplicity of imaginative processes that created it. Every attempt to classify the poetry as an unchangeable unit, overlooked the entire range of traditions and forms within the continuum of the black South African experience.

In the discussion of the politicizing approach it was found that Black Consciousness was not synonymous with Soweto poetry, but was an ideology which had different connotations to both the founder members and the artists who followed in their wake. The assumption that Black Consciousness informed all Soweto poetry was thus seen as a deliberate politicizing simplification, so that poems could be detached and classified in order of "revolutionary" status. The poetry examined showed little uniformity in political theme, or in "cultural purity". Consequently, thematic shifts in the emphasis of Soweto poetry, from one imposed category to another, were proved fatuous. Not only was the ideology of Black Consciousness itself deficient in its attempt to "categorize" itself - so too was the poetry that emerged to articulate the black experience. In fact all Eurocentric conventions - categories, divisions, borders, limits

etc., - were unable to label the poetry. Instead of accepting that there is a crisis in critical methodology, and that there are no existing terms that fit, politicizing definitions still abound; such as, "resistance poetry" or "apocalyptic poetry". There is little if any consistency and cohesion in this group of terms.

The ideological approach to Soweto poetry restricts itself to a "universal" grid reading, in which the aesthetic form of the poetry is subordinated to the materialist content. Poetry which endeavours to mix these two elements is discarded by these critics as petit-bourgeois. At the other extreme, worker poetry which highlights a political manifesto, to the exclusion of all else, is highly commended. The ideological approach thus ignores any of the pluralized mergings in Soweto poetry, and fails to progress beyond a social model comprising "universal" opposites such as "Petit-bourgeois" and "worker". At no time is the poetry's stylistic and ideological interplay addressed.

In the assessment of the linguistic approach, it was found that Western evaluative criteria were inadequate in evaluating poetry which is many dimensions removed from the specific cultural milieu of the "Great Tradition". The imposition of such criteria ultimately leads to a polarization between different literary conventions. Linguistic responses to the establishment of a new methodology, revealed a sophisticated focus which was technically superior to the artistic intentions and excluded the multiplicity of levels within and without Soweto poetry. Adaptation of the Western literary heritage by the

Soweto poets complicated this search for a black aesthetic yardstick. It was also found that any modification of Western criteria, only provides a new model from which deviations are measured and "common ground" mapped out. This set model, however, is as inadequate, in addressing the complex variation in Soweto poetry, as was its predecessor.

If these approaches are unable to provide the correct critical tools, it follows that any methodology, which underestimates the state of volatile evolution in Soweto poetry, will fail in its formulation and assessment of the black aesthetic. What is required, as Harari and Bell point out, are methodologies which are more inclusive:

if the separation of knowledge into regions, formations, or disciplines is no longer applicable, then knowledge must be reformulated on new bases, new practical and theoretical operators must be discovered and new operations be defined.<sup>1</sup>

To a large extent, the theory of deconstruction has responded to this need for an "all-encompassing" critical approach.

Deconstruction effaces all of the convenient distinctions which the politicizing, ideological and linguistic critical approaches rely on. The poem or text is exploded in deconstruction and all assumptions, which are based on closure and limitation, are removed in favour of a panoramic overview. For the deconstructionists, the writing of literature should not contribute towards its fixture in place or time - it should forever displace itself: "Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it forever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, deconstruction enables the poem to "expand", whereas in the critical approaches examined there was a need to reduce poetic elements to spatial relationships - to link subject and object in order to prepare the "evidence" for something that is not yet present or apparent in the poem. This so-called evidence argues for clear-cut limits to the meaning of Soweto poetry, but in deconstruction, the limit continually displaces itself: line into stanza, stanza into poem, poem into anthology and so on ad infinitum.

The above deconstructionist displacement also occurs with regard to the set of concepts used to set the limit; hence philosophy could easily "merge" into literary criticism or the opposite may occur - there is never a universal or unified theory.

This continual displacement would protect against any critical approach formulating a specifiable object, such as a random "black aesthetic"; for deconstruction takes into account the contamination of the perception of the object - the implied subject's desire to see it as he/she wished.

But the deconstructionist approach is also problematic. It is not a method or system which has a pattern applicable to other texts or poems, as the same textual structure is never at work. Consequently, the open-ended deconstruction theory can never lead to the conclusion or solution of the "black aesthetic" dilemma. What is also required in a critical model for Soweto poetry, therefore, is the ability to show the relationships between different systems of thought together with the cultural borrowings, detours, connections and nodes,

as this would help to unravel or emancipate the forms and forces at work within the poetry. This approach would be the closest aspirant to establishing the black aesthetic, because it would assess the nature and extent of the influences of language, history, society, politics, religion, etc., on the transformation of Soweto poetry. Instead of one specific approach, this broader perspective and its variety of responses will make for a more intensive investigation into the complex and intricate web of assimilations and adaptations in the poetry.

Critics have already realized the need for a new critical approach like the one outlined above. Mphahlele, for instance, has called for a "synthesis"<sup>3</sup> of Europe and Africa, while Rive has stressed that the synthesis should even be "more comprehensive than Africa and Europe"<sup>4</sup>. Nkosi also calls for a "synthesis between the old and new"<sup>5</sup>, a need to redefine and "refurbish" Africa. The rôle of the new criticism would then have to address broader relationships, or social processes, together with the diversity of constituent influences which gave rise to Soweto poetry in the first place. Such an approach is that of Michel Serres, who moves beyond the theory of deconstruction.

Serres' evaluative criteria, with regard to poetry, were illustrated in the introduction and used throughout this dissertation as a means of assessing the efficacy of each critical approach. It should be noted, however, that only a small part of Serres' encyclopaedic work has been used as an evaluative framework. This dissertation has drawn upon the central principles of his thesis; namely, that "passages"

exist between the arbitrarily imposed boundaries of theorists or critics. In other words, Serres would not focus on a linguistic critical approach and exclude an ideological one - he would rather explore the passages between these two approaches and, indeed, other approaches as well. As René Girard has observed, "In a very simplified manner, one might say that Serres always runs counter to the prevalent notion of two cultures...between which no communication is possible. In Serres' view 'criticism is a generalized physics' and whether knowledge is written in philosophical, literary, or scientific language, it nevertheless articulates a common set of problems that transcends academic disciplines and artificial boundaries."<sup>6</sup>

For Serres, there is not one entry into poetry, as each "entry" displaces itself into a multiple set of relations within the poem or text, but a multiplicity of entries or paths which are in continual circulation.<sup>7</sup> In short, Serres does not subordinate one concept to another (like the Marxist ideological approach) but conceives of a network of concepts which intersect and overlap each other. In Hermes II Serres stresses that:

the transport of concepts and their complexity,  
the intersection and overlapping of domains...  
represent, express, reproduce perhaps the very  
tissue in which objects, things themselves, are  
immersed - the all-encompassing and diabolically  
complex network of inter-information.<sup>8</sup>

What Serres is arguing is that domains such as "politics", "ideology" and "linguistics" are not distinguishable. They "oscillate frantically back and forth into one another, so that the idea of ever distinguishing between them becomes more

and more chimerical."<sup>9</sup> Serres is thus seen to be against any tendency to compartmentalize thought in separate and autonomous models - the failing of the politicizing, ideological, and linguistic approaches.

It may be seen how the critical tools required for the evaluation of Soweto poetry must not limit or block the circulation<sup>10</sup> of cultural borrowings, rejections and adaptations inherent in the poems. Any critical model that is applied to Soweto poetry can cause this restriction if it conforms to a "closed" methodology, such as politics or the materialist influences in the production of poetry. Only the critical model which broadens its perspective, and allows for the cohabitation of different systems of thought, can truly assess or disentangle the cultural mosaic of Soweto poetry.

\* \* \*

## NOTES

5. Critical Evaluation And Method

1. J.V. Harari & D.F. Bell (eds) in op cit p. xxxv.
2. C. Norris Deconstruction p. 29.
3. E. Mphahlele quoted in U. Barnett op cit p. 254.
4. R. Rive quoted in ibid p. 264.
5. L. Nkosi op cit p. lll.
6. R. Girard quoted in J.V. Harari and D.F. Bell (eds) in op cit p. xi (my emphasis).
7. ibid p. xxii.
8. M. Serres "Hermes II" p. 15 quoted in ibid p. xxiii.
9. ibid p. xxix.
10. ibid p. 37.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarez-Pereyre, J. The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa, London, Heinemann, 1984.
- Arnold, M. The Testimony of Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, London, Panther Books, 1984.
- Barnett, U.A. A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914-1918) London, Sinclair Browne, 1983.
- Biko, S. I Write What I Like, London, The Bowerdean Press, 1978.
- Boesak, A. Farewell To Innocence, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1977.
- Brink, A. Mapmakers: Writing In A State Of Siege, London, Faber and Faber, 1983.
- Brink, A. & Coetzee, J.M. (eds) A Land Apart, London, Faber and Faber, 1986.
- Césaire, A. Return to my Native Land, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969.
- Chaphole, S. "Critical Standards For African Literature" in The English Academy Review, vol 2, 1984.
- Chapman, M. A Century of South African Poetry, Cape Town, National Book Printers, 1985.
- Chapman, M. South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1984.
- Chapman, M. (ed) Soweto Poetry, Johannesburg, McGraw-Hill, 1981
- Chapman, M. (ed) The Paperback of South African English Poetry, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1986.
- Chapman, M. & Dangor, A. (eds) Voices from Within, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1982.

- Coetzee, J.M. White Writing, Johannesburg, Radix, 1988.
- Couzens, T. "Politics and Black Poetry in South Africa 1930-1950" in African Perspective, no 7, April, 1978.
- Couzens, T. & Patel, E. (eds) The Return of the Amasi Bird, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1982.
- Cronin, J. "'The law that says/Constricts the breath-line(...)': South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970's," in The English Academy Review 3, 1985.
- Daymond, M.J. et al (eds) Momentum: On Recent South African Writing, Univ of Natal Press, 1984.
- De Crespigny, A. & Schrire, R. (eds) The Government and Politics of South Africa, Cape Town, Juta, 1978.
- Egejuru, P.A. Black Writers: White Audience, New York, Exposition Press, 1978.
- Ellmann, R. & Feidelson, C. (eds) The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature, New York, 1965.
- Fanon, F. Black Skin White Masks, London, Paladin, 1970.
- Fatton, R. Black Consciousness in South Africa, Albany, State Univ of New York Press, 1986.
- Frankel, P. "Status, Group Consciousness and Political Participation: Black Consciousness in Soweto" in Univ of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 3-7 February, 1987.
- Gardner, C. "Poetry And/Or Politics: Recent South African Black Verse" in English In Africa, vol 9 no 1, May 1982.
- Gardner, S. (ed) Four South African Poets, Grahamstown, Rhodes Univ Printing Services, 1986.

- Gerhart, G.M. Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology, California Univ Press, Berkley, 1978.
- Glenn, I. "Review" in English in Africa vol 10, no 2, Oct 1983.
- Gordimer, N. "African Literature", a lecture given at U.C.T. Public Summer School, February 1972.
- Gordimer, N. The Black Interpreters, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1973.
- Gray, S. Southern African Literature: An Introduction, Cape Town, David Philip, 1979.
- Gwala, M. "Black Writing Today" in Staffrider, Johannesburg, vol 2, no 3, July-August 1979.
- Hallett, R. "New Winds of Change" in History Workshop, Paper no 1, 1976.
- Harari, J.V. & Bell, D.F. (eds) Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy, London, John Hopkins Univ Press, 1983.
- Heywood, C. (ed) Aspects of South African Literature, Johannesburg, Heinemann, 1976.
- Heywood, C. (ed) Perspectives on African Literature, London, Heinemann, 1979.
- Horn, P. "We All Sat Round A Faia" in Dead in One's Own Lifetime: Art in Apartheid Society, a collection of papers presented at the NUSAS Art And Liberation Week, U.C.T., 1-4 May, 1979.
- Horn, P. "When It Rains, It Rains", in Speak vol 1 no 5, 1978.
- Izevbaye, D.S. "The State of Criticism in African Literature" in African Literature Today, no 7, 1975.

- Khoapa,A. The South African Outlook,June/July,1972.
- Killam,G.D. African Writers on African Writing,London, Heinemann,1973.
- Langa,M. "Cultural Invasion" in MEDU 1,4, 1979.
- Leveson,M. & Paton,J.(eds) Voices of the Land,Johannesburg,Ad. Donker,1985.
- Lemon,A. Apartheid in Transition,London,Gower,1987.
- Lennox-Short, A.(ed) English and South Africa,Johannesburg, Nasou Ltd, 1973.
- Livingstone, D. "The Poetry of Mtshali,Serote,Sepamla and others in English: Notes towards a critical evaluation" in New Classic,no 3,1976.
- Malan,C.(ed) Race and Literature,Johannesburg,Owen Burgess,1988.
- Manganyi,N.C. Being Black in the World ,Johannesburg,Ravan Press,1973.
- Manganyi,N.C. Looking Through the Keyhole,Johannesburg,Ravan Press,1981.
- Matthews,J. Cry Rage!,Johannesburg,Spro-Cas Publications,1972.
- Memmi,A. The Colonizer and the Colonized,London, Souvenir Press,1974.
- Motlhabi,M. (ed) Essays on Black Theology,Johannesburg,University Christian Movement,1972.
- Mphahlele,E. "Mongane Serote's Odyssey: the path that breaks the heels" in English Academy Review vol 3,1985.
- Mphahlele,E. The African Image,London,Faber and Faber,1962.
- Mutloatse,M. Forced Landing,Johannesburg,1980.
- Mzamane,M.V. "Literature and Politics Among Blacks in South Africa" in New Classic,no 5,1978.

- Mzamane, M.      Serote: Selected Poems, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1982.
- Ngara, E.        Art and Ideology in the African Novel, London, Heinemann, 1987.
- Nkosi, L.        Home And Exile And Other Selections, New York, Longman, 1983.
- Norris, C.       Deconstruction, London, Methuen, 1982.
- Odendaal, A.    Vukani Bantu! The beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912, Cape Town, David Philip, 1984.
- Polley, J.A. & Wilhelm, P. (eds) Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers From Poetry '74, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1976.
- Riemenschneider, D. (ed) The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature, Germany, Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1983.
- Rive, R.        Selected Writings, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1977.
- Rive, R.        "The Black Man And White Literature" in New Classic (Special Issue), no 4, 1977.
- Rive, R.        Writing Black, Cape Town, David Philip, 1981.
- Roux, E.        Time Longer than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa, Univ of Wisconsin Press, U.S.A., 1978.
- Royston, R.     To Whom It May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Verse, Johannesburg, A.D. Donker, 1980.
- S.A. Survey of Race Relations, 1972.
- Sartre, J.P.     What Is Literature?, London, Methuen, 1978.
- Scholes, R.     Structuralism in Literature, Yale Univ Press, 1974.

- Sepamla, S. "The Black Writer In South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas" in New Classic no 3, 1976.
- Sitas, A. (ed) Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle, Durban, Worker Resistance and Cultural Publications, 1986.
- Sole, K. "Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948-1960", in University of Witwatersrand History Workshop: "The Witwatersrand: Labour, Townships and Patterns of Protest" 3-7 Feb, 1978.
- Sole, K. "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions" in English In Africa, Vol 10, no 1, May 1983.
- Sole, K. "Identities and Priorities in Recent Black Literature and Performance: A Preliminary Investigation", in paper no 22 of the Economic Development and Racial Domination Conference held at U.W.C. from 8-10 Oct 1984.
- Sole, K. "Prejudiced Approach" in Contrast no 46, Dec 1978.
- Sole, K. "The Abortion of the Intellect" in Dead in One's Own Lifetime: Art in Apartheid Society, a collection of papers presented at the NUSAS Art and Liberation Week, U.C.T. 1-4th May 1979.
- Tucker, J. "Poetry before protest" in Contrast, vol 11, no 1 Dec 1976.
- Ulyyat, A.G. "Dilemmas in black poetry", in Contrast vol 11, no 4, Dec 1977.
- van Niekerk, A.S. Dominee, are you listening to the drums?, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1982.
- Vaughan, M. "Ideological Directions in the Study of Southern African Literature", in English In Africa vol 9, no 2, Oct 1982.

- van Wyk Smith, M.      Shades of Adamastor, Grahamstown, Rhodes Univ  
Printing Services, 1988.
- Walshe, P.              The Rise of African Nationalism in South  
Africa, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1973.
- White, L. &              Literature And Society In South Africa, Cape  
Couzens, T. (eds)      Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1984.

## APPENDIX (POEMS)

Poems cited by title and lines only are taken from the anthologies listed below:

Voices of the Land : Leveson, M., & Paton, J. (eds)

In Detention  
They came at Dawn

The Paperbook of South African English Poetry Chapman, M. (ed)

Were the Muse to Come  
Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang

Voices from Within Chapman, M., & Dangor, A. (eds)

The Voices that are Dead  
the morning caught me  
Weep not for a Warrior  
Fathers and Sons  
On the steps

The Return of the Amasi Bird Couzens, T., & Patel, E. (eds)

CUSTODIAN OF OUR SPIRIT  
TIME TO COME HOME  
THE SILENCE OF THE ROCKS  
THE FACE  
THE RUSTLE IN THAT TALL DRY GRASS  
AFRIKA AT A PIECE (On Heroes Day)  
THE REVOLUTION OF THE AGED  
AZANIAN LOVE SONG  
THE SOLITAIRE  
INJUSTICE  
TRIP TO BOTSWANA  
FOR MY BROTHERS (MANDLA AND BHEKI) IN EXILE.