

‘Natal Literature’: A Scrap of History, and a Glance at some Poems

One cannot be certain that such an entity as ‘Natal literature’ can be said to exist. Of the authors who have lived in Natal, the majority have spent large parts of their lives elsewhere. It is clear too that literature, unlike some other forms of human activity, is often not particularly associated with a specific region; indeed the more important a writer is, usually, the less regional he or she will seem.

In spite of these difficulties there may perhaps be some value in looking at literature associated with Natal. But the subject is a complex one, and the material is vast. In this article I shall attempt only two things: a sketch of the history of ‘Natal literature’ until the 1930s, and a brief commentary on a number of poems written by authors who have spent significant periods of their lives in Natal.

I

The history of Natal and Zululand over the last 150 years or so has been in many respects turbulent and unhappy, and it has produced deep divisions between races and between classes. It is hardly surprising, then, that so far nobody seems to have managed to get a clear view of all the literature produced either in Natal (as it now is) or by people with Natal associations. An additional difficulty is that there are three Natal languages: Zulu, English and Afrikaans. When one considers the different interests and audiences that literary works of various kinds cater for, one realises that there could be said to be many more than three literatures.

The first literary compositions in the Natal area were oral, though some of them have been written down since; they were the songs, prayers and tales of the San (Bushmen) and of the Nguni peoples. Zulu oral literature is very rich; perhaps nothing in the literature of Natal is more striking or more beautiful; certainly nothing is more expressive of a highly integrated yet constantly evolving culture, than the many subtly-wrought *izibongo* or praise-poems, particularly those of the kings and other great men. (In various forms the tradition of the *izibongo* is still alive today).

The coming of white settlers in the first decades of the nineteenth century led to the beginnings of various European modes of writing — diaries, reports, stories. Then as the white population increased and European

civilization became dominant, other forms of writing began to appear: journalism, sermons, tracts and treatises of different sorts, eventually novels and verse. From about 1845, when most of the Trekkers left Natal, until the early twentieth century, European writing was almost exclusively in English. After 1860 Natal acquired an Indian population, and this too in due course made a contribution, mainly in English.

My chief concern in this sketch is with what is usually termed creative writing; but it is impossible not to mention two of the giants of Natal history, who were both also writers of memorable prose. The first is Bishop Colenso. An outspoken liberal in both religion and politics, he managed to create a stir in Britain and Natal simultaneously; his biblical criticism and his political-moral analyses and exhortations, which appeared mainly in the 1860s and 1870s, were equally striking. (His often prophetic work in the political field was ably continued after his death by his daughters.) The second great figure was M.K. Gandhi, later to be known as Mahatma. To the white citizens of Natal must fall the dubious honour of having provided the racial prejudice which pushed this young Indian lawyer on to the path which was to make him one of the major figures of twentieth-century political and intellectual history. His first important book, published in 1928 when he had returned to India, was called *Satyagraha in South Africa*; satyagraha — truth-force — was Gandhi's word for creative passive resistance.

Both Colenso and Gandhi found themselves challenged morally and intellectually by the relationships between races and cultures which have been such an important feature of the history of Natal, and indeed of South Africa as a whole. Many of the Natal versifiers and novelists or romancers of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries were interested in the same relationships, but at a distinctly more superficial level. The most competent of the writers of verse was Charles Barter, whose *Stray Memories of Natal and Zululand* (1897) is still worth reading. Undoubtedly the most remarkable of the fiction-writers associated with the Natal area was H. Rider Haggard. Though he spent only a few years in these parts, he located many of his tales and rooted his imagination in Natal. These tales, which were immensely popular — *King Solomon's Mines* (1886), *Nada the Lily* (1892), and so on — belong, we are now aware, to a particular moment in the history of British imperialism: their simple and robust excitement, their glorification of adventure and 'enterprise', their easy romanticization of black people, are all symptomatic. Yet these books have some real life, even today, and they do represent the beginnings of an attempt to bring white and black together on the fictional page.

Significant *writing* by Zulus was relatively slow to appear. This is largely because for various reasons, as Professor Albert S. Gérard has put it, 'missionary activity, which is of crucial importance to the introduction of writing and the formation of a written literature, began about half a century later among the Zulu than it did among the Xhosa.'¹

The first book in Zulu — a discussion of Zulu history and customs but also of black unity — was written by Magera Fuze and published in 1922.² The first Zulu novel to be published — *Insila kaShaka* (1930) — was written by the eminent cultural and political leader John L. Dube, who had also founded the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* in 1907. *Insila kaShaka* was an

important book, for it suggested some of the directions which much Zulu writing would take: it dramatized tensions between western Christian and traditional African values, and it showed a serious interest in that great and puzzling figure, Shaka. For most Zulu writers — and indeed for many other black writers too (one thinks of the Sotho Mofolo, the Senegalese Senghor, the Nigerian Soyinka) — an analysis of the personality and significance of Shaka has been a part of an overall investigation of the meaning of being a black person. The first novel in English by a black writer was published in 1928, two years before Dube's novel (Sol Plaatje's famous *Mhudi* had been written earlier but appeared later): this was *An African Tragedy*, by R.R.R. Dhlomo. It was a small work, yet it was prophetic in some ways, as it was a novel of the city; and the city, together with the sufferings of the oppressed and confused urban workers, forms one of the great themes of South African literature.

In the years which followed, there was a considerable amount of writing, in various genres, by black Natalians. R.R.R. Dhlomo, for example, produced a number of historical novels in Zulu. His younger brother H.I.E. Dhlomo, in some ways a more interesting figure, wrote, in English, plays, short stories, criticism, and (in 1941) *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, a long poem, rather loosely romantic and elegiac but nevertheless of considerable thematic interest. In the mid-thirties there emerged B.W. Vilakazi: he wrote three novels in Zulu, and became the first distinguished Zulu scholar (he joined the staff of the University of the Witwatersrand, gained a doctorate and was co-author of what has become the standard Zulu-English dictionary), but his greatest achievements are the two volumes — *Inkondlo kaZulu* (1935) and *Amal'ezulu* (1945) — in which Zulu written poetry can be said to have come of age.

While these developments were taking place among black writers, some very important work was being done by English-speaking whites; but there seems to have been almost no contact between black and white.³ In 1926 two brilliant young writers came together and, at Umdoni Park on the Natal south coast, edited and wrote articles for a new journal called *Voorslag* (Whiplash). The first of these writers was Roy Campbell, aged 24, who had been brought up in Natal⁴ and had made a name for himself in Britain with his long poem *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924). The second was William Plomer, who was 22 and had spent his childhood in the Transvaal and in Britain, but who had been living near Eshowe when he wrote his remarkable novel *Turbott Wolfe*, which was published in London early in 1926. *Turbott Wolfe* impressed Britain and the United States but scandalized most of white South Africa: it is a lively and imaginative book, which evokes Africans with great sympathy and is critical of most whites; its central theme is miscegenation, a topic which many white South Africans are reluctant to discuss even today. Campbell and Plomer were joined by a third young writer — Laurens van der Post, an Afrikaner, who was only nineteen. The Umdoni Park moment was one of the greatest that South African literature has yet produced: Campbell wrote some of his finest poems ('The Serf', 'The Zulu Girl', 'Tristan da Cunha'), and Plomer wrote his celebrated short story 'Ula Masondo', about a tribal Zulu who experiences the full impact of Johannesburg. But the *Voorslag* venture could not last: in its cultural and political views it was too advanced for public opinion — which meant, then,

white public opinion. The financial sponsors of the journal began to interfere in the editing, and the team dispersed — Plomer and van der Post to Japan, and Campbell back to Britain.

By this time a certain amount of creative work had been published by Afrikaans-speaking Natalians; Martha Jansen brought out a play as early as 1918. But the first really important 'Natal literature' in Afrikaans was produced in the mid-forties by D.J. Opperman.

II

Breaking off my survey at this point may seem arbitrary, but it is necessary. By the 1930s the picture has acquired a complication which puts it beyond the reach of a short essay.

In this second part of my article I propose simply to print an extract and a number of poems — with translations into English where the original language is Zulu or Afrikaans — and to make a few comments on them and their authors. My only aim is to give some immediate sense of the richness and variety of the work that has been produced. This way of presenting poems does not of course do full justice either to the poems or to the poets. More important, it is obviously unfair to focus all of one's attention on poetry and to omit novels, short stories, and plays — to say nothing of other types of literature. I have singled out poetry because it is the most concentrated form of literary art and can for this reason be more easily presented to the reader.

In adopting this procedure I have, inevitably, passed over many important writers. I name a few of the more recent ones (some of the earlier ones have been mentioned already): Bessie Head, C.L.S. Nyembezi, Jack Cope, Abraham de Vries, E.E.N.T. Mkhize, J.C. Dlamini, Henrietta Grové, June Drummond, Daphne Rooke, O.E.H. Nxumalo, Marlise Joubert, J.F. Holleman, Jenny Seed, Ronnie Govender, C.J.M. Nienaber, Jordan Ngubane, Khaba Mkhize.

With these explanations and apologies, then, I pass on to my brief anthology and commentary.

1. **Shaka's Praise Poem: Extracts**

UDlungwana kaNdaba!
 UDLungwana woMbelebele,
 Odlung' emanxulumeni,
 Kwaze kwas' amanxulum' esibikelana.
 UNodumehlezi kaMenzi,
 USishaka kasishayeki kanjengamanzi,
 Ilemb' eleg' amany' amalembé ngokukhalipha;
 UShaka ngiyesab' ukuthi nguShaka,
 UShaka kuyinkosi yasemaShobeni.
 UNomakhwelo ingonyama;
 UMahlom' ehlathini onjengohlanya,
 Uhlany' olusemehlwen' amadoda.
 UDabaz' ithafa ebeliya kuMfene;
 UNomashovushovu kaSenzangakhona,
 UGaqa libomvu nasekuphatheni. . .
 UTeku lwabafazi bakwa Nomgabhi,
 Betekula behlez' emlovini,

Beth'uShaka kakubusa kakuba nkosi,
 Kant' unyakan' uShaka ezakunethezeka.
 Inkom' ekhal' eMthonjaneni,
 Izizwe zonke ziyizwil' ukulila,
 Izwiwe uDunjwa waseluYengweni,
 Yezwiwa uMangcengeza wakwaKhali.
 Umlilo wothathe kaMjokwane;
 Umlilo wothathe ubuhanguhangu,
 Oshis' izikhova eziseDiebe,
 Kwaya kwasha neziseMabedlana.
 Odabule kuNdimba noMgovu,
 Abafaz' abenendeni baphuluza;
 Imikhubulo bayishiy' izinqindi,
 Imbewu bayishiya semahlangeni,
 Izalukazi zasala semanxiweni,
 Amaxhegu asala semizileni,
 Iziqu zemithi zabheka phezulu . . .
 Ozulu lizayo khwezan' abantwana,
 Ngabadala bodwa abazozibalekela,
 UDunjwa yedwa limkhandanisile . . .
 UMxoshi womuntu amxoshele futhi;
 Ngimthand' exosh' uZwide ozalwa uLanga,
 Emthabatha lapha liphuma khona,
 Emsingisa lapha lishona khona;
 UZwide wampheq' amahlonjan' omabili,
 Kuma kwedala ekwethuk' omusha.
 USilwane-helele emizini yabantu;
 USilwan' ubenduna kwaDibandlela.
 UBhincakade waze wafunyaniswa,
 Ovunulel' ezimfundeni zamanzi,
 Into zakhe zomuka namanzi . . .⁵

Dlungwana son of Ndaba!
 Ferocious one of the Mbelebele brigade,
 Who raged among the large kraals,
 So that until dawn the huts were being turned upside-down.
 He who is famous as he sits, son of Menzi,
 He who beats but is not beaten, unlike water,
 Axe that surpasses other axes in sharpness;
 Shaka, I fear to say he is Shaka,
 Shaka, he is the chief of the Mashobas.
 He of the shrill whistle, the lion;
 He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,
 The madman who is in full view of the men.
 He who trudged wearily the plain going to Mfene;
 The voracious one of Senzangakhona,
 Spear that is red even on the handle . . .
 The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,
 Joking as they sat in a sheltered spot,
 Saying that Shaka would not rule, he would not become chief,
 Whereas it was the year in which Shaka was about to prosper.
 The beast that howled at Mthonjaneni,
 And all the tribes heard its wailing,
 It was heard by Dunjwa of the Yengweni kraal,
 It was heard by Mangcengeza of Khali's kraal.
 Fire of the long dry grass, son of Mjokwane,
 Fire of the long grass of scorching force,
 That burned the owls on the Diebe hill,
 And eventually those on Mabedlana also burned.
 He who travelled across to Ndimba and Mgovu,
 And women who were with child gave birth easily;

The newly planted crops they left still short,
 The seed they left amongst the maize-stalks,
 The old women were left in the abandoned sites,
 The old men were left along the tracks,
 The roots of the trees looked up at the sky . . .
 He who is an oncoming storm, pick up the children,
 For it is only the adults who will flee by themselves,
 Dunjwa alone it has crushed . . .
 Pursuer of a person and he pursues him unceasingly;
 I liked him when he pursued Zwide son of Langa,
 Taking him from where the sun rises
 And sending him to where it sets;
 As for Zwide, he folded his two little shoulders together,
 It was then the elder was startled by the younger.
 Fierce animal in the homes of people;
 Wild animal that was in charge at Dibandlela's.
 He who dressed late was eventually overtaken,
 He who puts on his finery at the water's edge,
 His things will be washed away . . .⁶

(translated by Daniel Malcolm)

Even in cold print, and even in translation, this epic poem has, it seems to me, considerable power. But it was made for passionate recitation by an official praiser or *imbongi* on occasions of great excitement and importance, and it would have had an extra *communal* meaning which it is not easy to recapture fully. The *imbongi* was the mediator between the chief and his people, and the heroic qualities and deeds that he praised (sometimes he criticized too) were offered to the gathering not simply as personal laudation but as social ideals. Needless to say, most people at the gathering would have known all the names that appear in the poem, while at the same time recognizing, consciously or intuitively, the poet's artistic accomplishment.

Some modern readers may find the ideals offered here rather bloodthirsty and frightening. But it is important to remember that every culture has praised the warrior-virtues where they are felt to have been employed in a good cause. (English readers need go no further than *Henry V* or the wartime speeches of Churchill.) Shaka was the founder of the Zulu nation, and a leader of great intelligence, energy and boldness; he can be said to have partly created, by his life and exploits, some of the characteristic features of the corporate Zulu personality.

A reader who does not know Zulu will not of course be able to detect the poem's rhythmic subtlety; but the force of the imagery comes through in translation, and a careful look at the Zulu text reveals impressive rhetorical repetitions and delicately interlocking instances of assonance and alliteration (consider, for example, the first six lines). This is poetry in the richest sense of the word.

2. Roy Campbell (1901-1957)

The Zulu Girl

To F.C. Slater

When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder,
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies,
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslings her child tormented by the flies.

She takes him to a ring of shadow pooled
By thorn trees: purpled with the blood of ticks,
While her sharp nails, in slow caresses ruled,
Prowl through his hair with sharp electric clicks.

His sleepy mouth plugged by the heavy nipple,
Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feeds:
Through his frail nerves her own deep languors ripple
Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.

Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes
An old unquenched unsmotherable heat —
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still
That bears the coming harvest in its breast.⁷

On Some South African Novelists

You praise the firm restraint with which they write —
I'm with you there, of course:
They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
But where's the bloody horse?⁸

Roy Campbell is probably better known in the English-speaking world than any other South African poet.

Like several other twentieth-century writers — one thinks especially of D.H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats — Campbell was imaginatively excited by natural energies, the mysterious forces of the universe which in one manifestation or another work upon people or work through them. Many of his best-known poems — 'The Serf', 'The Zebras', 'Tristan da Cunha', 'The Sisters', 'Horses on the Camargue', 'Choosing a Mast' — are, partly, celebrations of nature's power. (Celebrations rather than analyses: Campbell lacks the complexity and profundity that one finds in Yeats and Lawrence.)

'The Zulu Girl', though it is a political poem, is also in its way a celebration of power — the power of the Zulu determination not to remain a subject people and the quiet but ominous power of a gathering African thunderstorm. One of the poem's most striking features is its fusing of these two great natural forces: the life-giving storm which must come at the end of a hot afternoon is given all the ferocity of a Zulu uprising, and the uprising, which is subtly foreshadowed, is made to seem as natural and as inevitable as the storm.

The poem is beautifully managed in every detail, and repays careful study. One notices, for example, the way in which many of the words not only vividly evoke what they are describing but carry a double suggestion, both

physical and psychological ('smoulder', 'flings', 'tormented', 'electric', and so on). Many of the phrases in the poem are powerful and memorable (for example, 'an old unquenched unsmotherable heat'), and rhythms and sounds constantly reinforce and deepen the meaning — consider, say, the effect of the short 'u' sounds and the sharp consonants in:

His sleepy mouth plugged by the heavy nipple

Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feeds.

The poem can be seen, too, as an elaborate harmony built up out of opposing elements of violence and tranquillity. This opposition is summarized, in the last line but one, with the phrase 'so terrible and still', and it is resolved, in the final line, in the crucial word 'harvest'.

Campbell was also a satirist — vigorous, boisterous even, sometimes very amusing. South Africans might perhaps note that as long ago as 1928 he began *The Waygoose* with these lines:

Attend my fable if your ears be clean,

In fair Banana Land we lay our scene —

South Africa, renowned both far and wide

For politics and little else beside.

The quatrain 'On Some South African Novelists' is superb; some people have thought it the best epigram written in English this century. It is interesting to note that here, too, Campbell's attention is focused on the fact — or rather the absence — of power.

3. William Plomer (1903-1973)

The Boer War

The whip-crack of a Union Jack
In a stiff breeze (the ship will roll),
Deft abracadabra drums
Enchant the patriotic soul —

A grandsire in St James's Street
Sat at the window of his club,
His second son, shot through the throat,
Slid backwards down a slope of scrub,

Gargled his last breaths, one by one by one,
In too much blood, too young to spill,
Died difficultly, drop by drop by drop —
'By your son's courage, sir, we took the hill.'

They took the hill (Whose hill? What for?)
But what a climb they left to do!
Out of that bungled, unwise war
An alp of unforgiveness grew.⁹

Plomer employed a number of styles in prose and in verse; but an urbane yet serious irony is fairly common.

In this poem one is struck by the calculated incongruity of the juxtapositions. The first stanza evokes effectively (though the suggestion of irony is there from the first) the heady emotion of patriotism: this, then, is the feeling that kept the British Empire going. The words 'abracadabra' and 'enchant' carry the hint that patriots allow themselves to be bewitched.

Suddenly we are transported from a parade on a battleship to a vision of an old man in a London club. But the leap makes sense: the club is also a

facet of British imperial life. Two lines later we are on a battlefield, and we are given a shockingly exact picture of the death of a British soldier, the clubman's son. Why did he die? 'By your son's courage, sir, we took the hill.'

But, as the last stanza goes on to stress, that kind of answer is hopelessly unsatisfactory. The minor triumphs of battle look paltry and dubious in a larger perspective, and indeed the whole war created problems far greater than any that the British could have claimed to be attempting to solve.

4. *Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947)*

Inyanga

Nyanga, muhlekezi womnyama,
Wen' owaditshani swa nenyanga,
Yathi yon' ithwal' izikhwama
Yetsheth' izimpondo nemigodla
Wena wawenyuk' uyezulwini.

Wen' omuhle ebusuku
Laph' abanye bemathunz' amzizi,
Uhlangane nabo bakusinde,
Kodwa wena ma uqhamuka
Kuqin' amadolo ngihambe.

Ngikubonile ngisekhaya,
Ungiphumele phezu kwethantala,
Lamanz' emisinga yolwandle
Ngama ngaphuthelwa kuhamba
Ngakhex' umlomo ngadla ngamehlo.

Obab' omkhulu bakubon' uphuma
Ugqolozela umhlaba kanje,
Uphuphis' abalel' ubuthongo,
Ufunz' izimbongi ngamazwi
Ziwaqephuze zikhihliz' amagwebu
Asik' imizwa yomphefumulo kuphela.

Nami ngifunze Nonyezi,
Nyezi wemingcw' yokusa,
Obuhle bakho buqhamuka
Phezu kwamadamu emifula,
Nasohlazeni lotshani bezintaba.

Wen' odud' izithandani
Engizibon' emizin' emkhulu
Abelung' abayivus' emathanjeni
Abantwana bakaZulu noXhoza
NoMsuthu. Ngithi ma nami ngithi
Ngiyaphuma ngidonsa okudonsa
Umunt' ophila enozwelo lwemvelo,
Ngithuke ngikhalelwa zinsimbi.

Ngiphakele nami kuleyondebe,
Ongiphakela kuyo lapho
Ngikhumbul' ekhaya, ngibon' amahlathi,
Ngibon' izigodi, ezimbiwa imichachazo
Ngizwe ukuduma kolwandle,
Ngibon' ucansi lwamasimu akamoba,
Engiwakhumbula maqede ngibheke
Phezulu, ngikubone uliqand' elimhlophe,
Ngikhothame: Ngabe ngiyakwanga,
Pho!¹⁰

The Moon

O moon, bright queen of darkness! —
 Some see you as a healer
 Who carries medicine bags
 And shoulders horns and satchels;
 I watch you climb the skies.

Dear moon, so radiant at night
 When shadows dim the world
 And mortals change to spectres,
 Your shining presence in the sky
 Renews my courage to look ahead.

How often I watched you when at home
 You rose above the widely surging
 Waters of the sky-bound sea;
 While staring transfixed and open-mouthed,
 I feasted my eyes in wonder.

My forbears must have watched you too,
 Gazing down, as now, upon the world,
 Bringing dreams to those who sleep
 And inspiration to wakeful poets
 Striving to compose such songs
 As echo through the human soul.

Inspire me too, O pallid moon,
 Fading in the ghostly dawn,
 Faintly hovering in beauty
 Over the waters of the river
 And greening grasses of the hills!

Enchanting and merciful to lovers
 Whom often I see in sprawling cities
 Raised by white men on the graves
 Of children of the Zulus, Xhosas,
 Sothos — all. But, when I thus
 Have ventured out, enticed by beauty,
 Sacred to one who worships nature —
 I hear the warning of the curfew.

Heal, I pray, my vain nostalgia
 When I hanker for the forests
 And valleys eroded by the rains,
 And crave to hear again the sea
 Where fields of sugar-cane spread towards the shore.
 Dreaming of these, once more I look above
 And watch your elusive pale white globe:
 Then, as I offer my obeisance,
 I whisper my longing to reach you and embrace you.¹¹

(translated by Florence Louie Friedman)

Ngoba . . . Sewuthi

Ngoba ngimamatheka njalo
 Ngikhombisa nokwenama,
 Ngihlabelela ngephimbo,
 Nom' ungifak' emgodini
 Ngaphansi kweziganeko
 Zamatsh' aluhlaz' omhlaba
 Sewuthi nginjengensika
 Yon' engezwa nabuhlungu.

Because . . .

Because you always see me smile,
 You think that I must be content:
 Because I sing with all my voice,
 The while you drive me underground
 To find the treasure hidden there —
 Those diamonds tinting earth with blue:
 You say that I am like a log
 Insensitive to pain.

Ngob' umlomo wam' uhleka
 Namehlw' am' ebheke phansi
 Ngifingqe ngabek' idolo
 Nezinwele sezimpofu
 Zigwel' uthuli lomgwaqo
 Ngipheth' ipiki ngesandla;
 Neyemb' elingenamhlane
 Sewuthi nginjengedwala
 Lon' elingakwaz' ukufa.

Ngoba njalo ngakusihlwa
 Sengigumul' iketango
 Lomsebenz' onzim' emini,
 Ngihlangana nabakithi
 Siyogadlela ngendlamu
 Singoma ngamadala
 Asikizelis' igazi,
 Kuphele nokukhathala,
 Sewuthi ngiyisilwane
 Esifa kuzalw' esinye.

Ngoba ngiwumngquphane
 Ngibulawa ukungazi,
 Ngingaqondi namithetho,
 Kodwa ngizwa ingiphanga;
 Nendlu yami ngiyibeke
 Ngaphansi kweziwa zetshe;
 Utshani buyindlu yami,
 Isaka liyisivatho;
 Sewuthi ngiyisiduli,
 Kanginalo nonyembezi
 Olucons' enhliziyweni,
 Luwel' ezandlen' ezinhle
 Zamadloz' abuka konke.¹²

Because you see my laughing lips,
 My downcast eyes,
 My trousers rolled above the knee,
 My matted hair like ochre
 From dust of sandy roads,
 My hand around a pick,
 My shirt without a back:
 You say I am insentient
 And durable as rock.

Because, when night approaches,
 You see me loosening the chains
 Of daily drudgery,
 And, meeting people black like me,
 Dance with new-born energy
 While chanting tribal songs
 That rouse our stifled zest
 And banish weariness:
 You think me but an animal
 Who, should it die, is soon replaced.

Because I am a simple dupe
 Who pays the price of ignorance
 And cannot understand these laws
 That use, abuse me and exploit me;
 Because you see me build my shack
 Beneath the rocky krantz
 And know my home is made of grass,
 My garment but a sack —
 You think that I accept my lot
 And have no cause to weep.
 But tears secreted in the heart,
 Flow only onto sacred hands
 Of spirits never blind to human anguish.¹³

(translated by Florence Louie Friedman)

In some of the poems in his first volume, *Inkondlo kaZulu* (Zulu Songs), Vilakazi, partly under the influence of the English Romantic poets, tried experimenting with European metrical forms; but in his second volume, *Amal'ezulu* (Zulu Horizons), from which these two poems are taken, he has fully developed a style of his own, modelled to some extent on the praise-songs or *izibongo*.

Vilakazi wrote poems on a variety of subjects, but in almost all of them one is aware of his brooding, probing personality, his love of the Zululand and Natal of his childhood and youth, his desire to be a true poet and true spokesman for his people, and his abhorrence of the indignities suffered by his fellow blacks.

'Inyanga' is one of his more intimate poems, a poem in which the writer's personality is vividly conveyed to the reader. In his poetic use of the moon he has succeeded in combining traditional Zulu notions (in Zulu, for example, 'inyanga' can also mean a diviner or herbalist) with ideas that he might have come across in English poets. The poem expresses the writer's sense of being not only alienated in a white-dominated city but also, to some extent, lonely in a disappointing world. At the same time the moon, symbolizing the mysterious power both of the universe and of the poetic imagination, is a source of inspiration to him.

'Ngoba . . . sewuthi' is one of those poems, typical of many black writers, in which the 'I' means not merely 'I myself' and 'I as a member of the human race' but 'I as a member of our community'. This kind of representativeness, partly inherited from the *izibongo*, has been reinforced by the experience of oppression. The poem is indeed an expression of protest and disaffection. The black man is exploited by the white man, who salves his conscience by taking the black man's rather desperate attempts to cheer himself up as indications of real happiness and unconcern. The black man is grieved and angry at being hopelessly misunderstood, but his final appeal is not to the hearts of white people, or (as with some recent black poets in exile) to those who might conduct an 'armed struggle', but to the *amadlozi*, the spirits of the dead.

5. D.J. Opperman (born 1914)

Man met Flits

In die klein wit kol
van my wete stol
bruin en skerp 'n klip
soos 'n bok wat skrik,
staan, vinnig weghol
uit die klein wit kol.
Aan 'n takkie hang
twee ogies wat bang
uit die klein wit skyn
van my flits verdwyn.
Oor waters wat glip
soek ek klip na klip
maar 'n duister land
bedreig my alkant.¹⁴

Digter

Ek is gevang
en met die stryd
êrens in die ewigheid
op 'n Ceylon verban
waar al my drange
na 'n verlore vaderland
my dag na dag geëiland
hou met horisonne en verlange,
en in die geel gloed van die kers
snags deur die smal poort
van die wonder elke woord
laat skik tot klein stellaties vers
wat groei tot boeg en mas
en takelwerk — en die uiteindelijke
reis met die klein skip
geslote agter glas.¹⁶

Man with Flashlight

In my small white spot
of awareness clots,
brown and sharp, a rock
like a startled buck,
stands, is off like a shot
out of the small white spot.
On a twig suspended
two eyes that, offended,
disappear from the small, white
glow of my light.
Stone by stone, by its gleam
I feel across the stream,
but a darksome land
threatens on either hand.¹⁵

(translated by Guy Butler)

Poet

I have been taken
prisoner of war,
eternally, afar
on some Ceylon forsaken.
The call of the lost way
back to the fatherland,
keeps me here islanded
day after day,
from words at candle-time,
creating under
the narrow gate of wonder,
small structures of rhyme,
that grow to bows and mast
and rigging, till I slip
the cable of my small ship
finally englassed.¹⁷

(translated by William Branford)

Kersliedjie

Drie outas het in die haai Karoo
 die ster gesien en die engel gego,
 hul kieries en drie bondels gevat
 en aangestryk met 'n jakkalspad
 al agter die ding wat skuiwend skyn
 op 'n plakkie, 'n klip, 'n syferfontein,
 oor die sink en die sak van Distrik Ses
 waar 'n kersie brand in 'n stukkende fles,
 en daar tussen esels en makriel
 die krip gesien en neergekniel.
 Die skaapvet, eiers en biltong
 nederig gelê voor God se klong
 en die Here gedank in gesang en gebed
 vir 'n kindjie wat ook dié volk sou red . . .
 Oor die hele affêre het uit 'n hoek
 'n broeis bantam agterdogtig gekloek.¹⁸

Christmas Carol

Three outas from the High Karoo
 saw the star, believed the angel true,
 took knob-sticks, and three bundles with
 and set forth along a jackal path,
 following that bright and moving thing
 that shone on shanty, rock and spring,
 on zinc and sacking of District Six —
 in a broken bottle a candle flicks
 where salt fish hangs and donkeys jib,
 and lights them kneeling by the crib.
 Biltong, sheep fat, and eggs they've piled
 humbly before God's small brown child.
 With hymn and prayer for thanks, they tell
 That a child will save *this* folk as well . . .
 And on her nest, throughout the whole affair
 a bantam clucks with a suspicious stare.¹⁹

(translated by Anthony Delius)

Dirk Opperman comes from the Dundee district, and took an M.A. degree at the University in Pietermaritzburg in 1939. Since 1960 he has been Professor at the University of Stellenbosch. He is generally regarded as the greatest living Afrikaans poet.

Of all the poets that appear in this chapter, Opperman is perhaps the most difficult to do any sort of justice to in a short space. He is a poet of remarkable depth, complexity and variety. In his uses of symbolism and in the philosophical edge to his poetic explorations, in his recognition of central tensions in human existence and in his translation of these tensions into the structure of his poetry, Opperman is in some ways comparable to such great twentieth-century masters as Yeats, Rilke and Valéry. And yet his poetry is profoundly South African too — profoundly of this soil.

'Man met flits' is on one level a sharply-etched account of the experiences of a man making his way, past stones, branches and waters, with a torch or flashlight. But there is obviously, from the first, a deeper resonance: the poem is offering, in fact, an account of man's life in the universe; the torch, with its bright but narrow and moving ray of light, represents man's perception (as is made clear in the first stanza). Life is dark, then. What we see we tend to see fleetingly, and in isolation; we never get the full 'daylight' picture. Moreover the very act of seeing is rather frightening to us, and we seem somehow to frighten away the things that we look at: they won't stay still to be examined. We managed to keep going, with great difficulty; but on both sides a dark land threatens us. It is a sharp, grim, challenging poem. Its short words and spiky consonants thrust themselves at us like objects seen briefly by the light of a torch.

In some respects 'Digter' resembles 'Man met flits'. The poet is a person who is actively aware that he (like other people) is an exile from a lost fatherland — the land, presumably, where meaning and fulfilment exist. All his longings draw him back towards this fatherland, and he resolves to construct a poetic work which will be the ship in which he will sail home. At

last the vessel is fully rigged, and the journey begins — but the ship is in a bottle, it can't be launched on a real sea. What does the poem mean? It seems to suggest that our noble or desperate attempts to reach the truth — valuable though they may well be — are all subjective, perhaps even solipsistic. We cannot escape the glassy confines of our own visions. The best that we can attain to is a personal, long-distance view of the truth. The imagery of Ceylon and the fatherland is of course South African (in the Anglo-Boer War, some Boer prisoners were sent to Ceylon, now Sri Lanka), and the poem may have some meaning on this level. But undoubtedly its main thrust is universal.

'Kersliefdjie' is one of the poems in which Opperman shows his lively awareness of social and political problems. The birth of Christ — tersely and vividly recounted — is seen as an event in the life of the 'Coloured' community. The poem recreates crucial features of the Christmas story which are apt to be blurred, particularly in the eyes of those upon whom society bestows privileges: the poverty in which Christ lives is real, not merely decorative, and the salvation that he embodies has been offered to all human beings, and especially to those who are humbled by being poor and powerless. The final stanza is enigmatical; it perhaps suggests that the poet, like the bantam, for various reasons reserves his judgment on 'the whole affair'.

6. Alan Paton (born 1903)

In the Umtwalumi Valley

In the deep valley of the Umtwalumi
 In its tribal valley with its kaffirboom
 Red, red, and red again along the banks
 We in our swiftly moving car
 Pass small boys on the road walking
 And they call out in their own language
 For pleasure or hope of gain, I cannot say,
 Their salutations, father, father.
 Yes, I will not forget your salutations
 I sit here pondering the deep meanings
 The solemn and sacred meanings
 Of your salutations
 I sit here pondering the obligations
 The solemn and sacred obligations
 Of your words shouted in passing.²⁰

Except for a crucial thirteen years as Principal of a reformatory at Diepkloof (now part of Soweto), Alan Paton has spent most of his life in Natal. He has, however, travelled widely, in South Africa and overseas. His novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) — a story of Johannesburg and of the Natal country districts — has made more of an impact, in this country and in the world at large, than any other book by a South African.

'In the Umtwalumi Valley' may seem a very small piece with which to represent Paton's great imaginative capacities; but in fact this haunting little poem, written in 1949, conveys a number of his central preoccupations.

The opening lines take us deep into the Natal countryside (which Paton has often described so memorably), but they take us also, we feel, into the

poet's inner consciousness and towards the heart of the country's innermost problem:

We in our swiftly moving car

Pass small boys on the road walking . . .

In a few words, with great simplicity, we are given the gist of the South African issue: rich whites as against poor blacks, an affluent economy interwoven with rural underdevelopment — an overall complexity in which everyone is involved. The poet hears and sees the boys calling out to him — 'father, father' — and he considers the meaning of their call.

He ponders: the style of the poem, with its Whitmanesque repetitions, suggests — as much of Paton's writing does — a man thinking deeply and earnestly. He feels that behind the salutations thrown out by the small boys — 'For pleasure or hope of gain, I cannot say' — there lie 'solemn and sacred meanings', meanings which the boys themselves are not distinctly conscious of but which the poet in his partial detachment can discern. What he is above all aware of is that the boys' salutations — all that they signify, all that they suggest — lead to obligations, 'solemn and sacred obligations', in the poet, in the reader, in white people, in society at large.

It could be said that Alan Paton's life-work has been a continual attempt to articulate and dramatize these 'obligations'.

7. *H.W.D. Manson (1926-1969)*

Prologue to *Pat Mulholland's Day*

(Spoken by the playwright or his representative)

Now that you are settled and still,
The house lights doused and dim,
Make your minds like this dim darkness
And bring up into it the smallest speck,
The tiniest mote or atom it can think of — tip and touch
And yet hold some memory of so doing —
And imagine it

Spinning and spinning in empty space.
Then say this spinning speck
Is our whole world — in one perspective.

Ridiculous that it should spin
Being flung off so long ago
From another star or other speck
That still is spinning, I suppose, somewhere —
Or exploded — long ago — gone —
In a silent white blast we never heard
Or ever shall see,
Although that blast may be
What will blow our world away one day.

Yet this day our little world still spins . . .
Magnify this mote or speck and what do we see?
It is dark on the one side away from the sun,
Silver bright, it seems, on the other,
And spinning and spinning continuously . . .

And on that mote or speck are men — millions of them —
Infinitesimal animals —
Who crawl upon its surface and cling
To life and this atom as it spins

Through day and night
 Dark and light
 And life and death
 In a day, so to say — ridiculous!
 Ridiculous to live at all
 On such a tiny spinning ball!
 But these are words, mere words . . .
 Let's zoom our minds down, say, in human focus and feel;
 Know and feel and see
 Our huge, majestic world reel slowly through centuries,
 And the great and glorious sun come up slowly,
 And the distant, vast hills begin to loom,
 Soar and assume dark shapes and sharp edges
 Against the pale pink of the sky,
 And the high peaks run down in ridges
 To the wet, dark, silent valleys below,
 Where nothing yet can be known but noises,
 Running water and the croak of frogs.
 But the world turns,
 And pink pales slowly to pearly gold.
 And rivers run not nowhere now,
 And no longer only murmur in darkness
 As if they'd lost their way;
 We see.
 We see reed beds dimly swaying and dark rocks,
 And how the river mist lifts and curls.
 As rose to pale gold lost,
 So pale gold now to other lightness lifts,
 And clouds all mackerel green and grey
 Stay steady like a painted scene,
 While the clear light of morning blue is set
 That declares the scene is day.
 What sort of day has dawned for this man
 Whom we shall see presently behind this curtain?
 Nothing is certain but that dawn begins
 And night ends day.
 And who among us shall see the next dawn certainly
 No man can say.²¹

Harley Manson taught for a number of years in the English Department of the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. He wrote ten plays, in free and flexible verse; a number of poems; and an unfinished novel. This is the prologue to one of his plays.

It is not only an effective introduction — preparing the audience imaginatively for a play which will present a most important day in one man's life — but it offers, challengingly, two visions of human life: one cold and scientific, the other more immediate and human and perhaps therefore more true. In the last six lines the two visions are to some extent brought together.

The writing is fresh, lively, intensely poetic. Without any sense of conscious art, the passage abounds with subtly-evocative alliterations, assonances, internal rhymes; and again and again words and phrases, through their sounds and rhythms, actually enact what they are expressing.

The scenes conjured up in the second half of the poem are both specific and universal; but no-one who knows the province can doubt that they were inspired by the countryside of Natal.

8. *Sheila Cussons (born 1922)*

1945

Europa lê in puin: 'n swart koerantberig,
staccato, stomp; 'n oggendteegerug.
Europa is 'n krater in die firmament, niks meer.
Maar deur die blokkiesraaisel van verstarde staal
tuimel die reëngrou duiwe heen en weer,
hunkerend na broeityd, neste op die plein
en paring bo die swart verminkte katedraal.
'n Aartsengel lê in die reën se glans en stil verteer
die roes sy silwer vlerk, die kosmos van sy silwer brein.²²

1945

Europe lies in ruins: a black headline story,
staccato, blunt: a teacup prattle.
Europe is a crater in the firmament, no more.
But through the crossword puzzle of rigid steel
the rain-grey pigeons tumble, flap and soar,
longing for broods, to nest and mate again
above the black cathedral's tortured shell.
An Archangel lies in the rain's wet gleam, and rust devours
quietly his silver wing, the cosmos of his silver brain.²³

(translated by Jack Cope and Uys Krige)

This is a strong little poem, a piece of modern impressionism which catches brilliantly something of the agony of the end of the Second World War. Large areas of Europe, once so proud, have been devastated. But still, undeterred by human tragedies, the forces of life reassert themselves. Man will continue too, of course — but has his spiritual dimension, his religion, been irreparably damaged? Does this poem tell the story of the twentieth century?

Sheila Cussons lived in Natal for many years, but is now in Spain.

9. *Ina Rousseau (born 1926)*

Eden

Staan daar nog in Eden êrens,
verlate soos 'n stad in puin,
met poorte grusaam toegespyker,
deur eeue die mislukte tuin?
Word daar nog die swoele dae
deur swoele skemering en nag vervang
waar donkergeel en purper vrugte
verrottend aan die takke hang?
Sprei daar ondergronds 'n netwerk
soos sierkant deur die rotse heen:
die sware, onontgonne riwwe
van goud en onikssteen?
Vloei daar deur die natgroen struike
nog met kabbeling wat ver weerklink,
die viertal glasblink waterstrome
waarvan geen sterfling drink?

Eden

Lies there still in Eden somewhere,
deserted like a town in ruins,
with gates closed up and nailed so grimly
that ill-starred garden, through the aeons?
Are the sultry days still followed
by sultry dusk and night time now,
where purple and dark yellow clusters
of fruit hang rotting on the bough?
Underground, is there a network
that runs like lace through rocks unknown
of heavy undeveloped ridges
of gold and onyx stone?
Do there flow with rippling echoes
through dank green bushes on their brinks
that clear quartet of crystal streams
at which no mortal drinks?

Staan daar nog in Eden êrens
verwaarloos soos 'n stad in puin,
gedoem tot langsame verrotting
deur eeue die mislukte tuin?²⁴

Lies there still in Eden somewhere
neglected like a town in ruins
and doomed to gradual putrefaction
that ill-starred garden, through the aeons?²⁵
(translated by C.J.D. Harvey)

Ina Rousseau lives in Pietermaritzburg.

This poem, like Sheila Cussons's, presents a ruin; but what lies decaying here is not the hard factual Europe of 1945 but the Garden of Eden, an entity or an experience that can be thought of as both mythical and psychological. The elegiac tone and the formality of the verse are typical of the poet.

Since human beings were banished from the Garden — since it has remained therefore an unlivable ideal — what has become of it? It is now 'mislukte' ('ill-starred'), useless, wasted. Its gates are nailed up; its fruit is rotting; its underground riches are untapped and unknown; its marvellous waters are untasted. This Garden, which lies 'somewhere', is located (one feels) partly in history, partly in some area of the human mind. It is as if the human capacity to live up to an ideal has died, or perhaps as if to yearn for an ideal is to dedicate oneself to 'langsame verrotting' ('gradual putrefaction'). The restrained, traditional stanzas form an odd and disturbing counterpoint to the jarring quality of the theme.

10. *Mazisi Kunene (born 1930)*

To the Soldier Hero

Who was Langula
That he should trample over a thousand victims
And praise himself over their graves?
Is it not true: for him there was only one great joy —
To hold the iron dripping with their blood,
As though this fame
Fulfills all life's ambition?
But even he who sharpened the edge of hearts
Conceived new truths,
Telling us that truth is not the truth of swords,
But the long buds growing from the ruins.²⁶

Mazisi Kunene took an M.A. degree at the University of Natal in Durban, but for twenty years he has been a voluntary exile, living first in London, now in California. He is an authority on Zulu tradition; writes many of his poems in Zulu before translating them into English; and has published, in English, an epic poem on Shaka.

Kunene's poems cover a wide range of subjects. A number of them are 'freedom poems', in which the lonely exile fiercely proclaims the right of black people to live in freedom in the land of their birth. The poet does not however believe in militancy simply for its own sake — as 'To the Soldier Hero' reveals.

In this poem, as in all of his successful pieces, the reader is struck by the vigour of the words, the eloquence of the rhythms (it is as if one can actually hear the words being passionately spoken) and by the vivid simplicity of the images.

11. *Douglas Livingstone (born 1932)*

Steel Giraffes

There are, probably, somewhere
arms as petal-slight as hers;
there are probably somewhere,
wrists as slim;
quite probably, someone has
hands as slender-leafed as hers;
the fingers, probably
bare of rings, as thin.

Certainly, there is nowhere
such a dolour
of funnels, mastings, yards,
filaments of dusk ringing shrouds
woven through the word goodbye,
riveted steel giraffes
tactfully looking elsewhere,²⁷
necks very still to the sky.

Mpondo's Smithy, Transkei

Cold evenings: red tongues and shadows
spar under this dangerous thatch
rust-patched; one weather wall of planks;
long-limbed tools, wood, coal in smoke-dimmed stacks;
a hitched foal's harness musical.

The grindstone's rasped pyrotechnic
threatens the stopped-dead angled tip
of a stripped Cape cart that waits on
the return of its motivation;
a sudden hiss as quenched irons cool.

Two cowed purple-cheeked bellows-boys
pump, or jump for smiths or furies;
files of elders sucking pipestems,
ordered by fire's old feudalism,
squat: wrinkled jury on this skill.

Horseshoes, blades, shares and lives: all shaped
to the hoarse roar and crack of flame,
by the clang of metallic chords,
hammer-song, the anvil's undertone;
nailed to one post a jackal's skull.²⁸

Douglas Livingstone is one of the most distinguished of contemporary South African poets. He lives in Durban.

'Steel Giraffes' is a fascinating love poem, both traditional and very modern. The first stanza, with its partly unromantic tone, serves to focus our attention not so much upon the appearance of the loved woman (though that is there too) as upon the profound moment of parting that is suggested in the second stanza. And this moment is evoked, boldly, by a description not of the couple but of the scene at the quayside. It is in 'funnels, mastings, yards', and finally in the seemingly-sentient cranes, that the poet's emotion lodges itself; and it is through these images, which while remaining factually vivid quietly become psychological symbols, that his emotion is conveyed to us.

'Mpondo's Smithy, Transkei' is a striking, concentrated picture, but the painting is made up not of pigments and brush-strokes but of rich words, resonances, rhythms. The poem succeeds in summoning up a way-of-life which is alert, energetic, traditional, in close harmony with both natural and supernatural forces.

12. *Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali (born 1940)*

Boy on a Swing

Slowly he moves
to and fro, to and fro,
then faster and faster
he swishes up and down.

His blue shirt
billows in the breeze
like a tattered kite.

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

Mother!

Where did I come from?
When will I wear long trousers?
Why was my father jailed?²⁹

Oswald Mtshali is naturally associated mainly with the Johannesburg area: he was the first of the Soweto poets of the late sixties and early seventies to have a collection of poems published. But he spent the first eighteen years of his life in Natal.

Many of Mtshali's poems present vignettes of township life — precise, pungent, ironical.

The first stanza of 'Boy on a Swing' is a skilful evocation of the swinging. In the second stanza, besides the suggestions of carefree pleasure, there is perhaps in the third line a hint of vulnerability, of deprivation. The next five lines offer the results of the swinging: on the one hand, giddiness and confusion; on the other, a shaking-up of normal thought-categories, and so a new focusing and questioning.

The final three lines present the questions of a child. The first is philosophical or religious. The second is more superficial and social — but equally important to a child. The final line is clearly the climax of the poem. It startles us; yet it seems to be introduced quite casually. Again the child cannot distinguish one type of question from another. But can we? The fact that the child's father is in jail — what *kind* of fact is it? Is it something to be explained in terms of the workings of society, or is it somehow a part of the constitution of the universe? We are led to suspect that it must surely be the former; but it can easily *feel* like the latter — to the child, to us, to anyone who is either suffering or benefiting from the conditions imposed by our society.

13. *Peter Strauss (born 1941)*

Femme-Fleur

I sing of a lady
Who is matchless;
Tall she is, and
Springy, a daisy —
Head on a stalk
(But no ways leafy)
— Who well defends herself
But isn't touchy
— Who's grave and gentle.
She bows her head to kiss me:
Her lips are softer than satin,
Her mouth is full of honey.
Gay she is sometimes
And bitter at others
(What does she have against me?)
And fierce she is in her loving
And reproach —
But always gentle,
Always witty.³⁰

Peter Strauss teaches at the University of Natal in Durban, and has distinguished himself not only as a poet but as a literary critic too.

His writing is intelligent, lively, always original. In this poem he produces a subtle, witty, deeply affectionate portrait.

14. *Mafika Pascal Gwala (born 1946)*

Kwela-Ride

Dompas!
I looked back
Dompas!
I went through my pockets
Not there
They bit into my flesh (handcuffs).
Came the kwela-kwela
We crawled in.
The young men sang.
In that dark moment
It all became familiar.³¹

Mafika Pascal Gwala was born and educated in Natal, and lives at Mpumalanga, near Hammarsdale.

'Kwela-Ride' is a vivid poem of 'black experience' — or of the experience of anyone who feels the victim of an unjust and arbitrary system of law-enforcement. The poem is brief, and surprising: that is a part of its point. It is also dramatic; every line offers a new concrete fact. And the details are significant. 'I looked back': he is stopped short in his tracks, addressed rudely from behind. 'I went through my pockets': one pictures the man's desperation, and his humiliation, there in the street. 'They bit into my flesh

(handcuffs)': the handcuffs bite, but behind the physical biting is the psychological biting of 'they', the 'guardians' of society. 'We crawled in': the people are reduced now to the condition of animals or insects. 'The young men sang' — in defiance, but also to raise their morale.

In that dark moment

It all became familiar

What the poem offers us is, in the end, not an isolated incident but a central fact of folk-experience.

15. *Chris Mann (born 1948)*

**The Prospect from Botha's Hill
on Good Friday**

Far below,
in the grey-blue valley,
the valley of a thousand wrinkly hills,
an unseen donkey and cockerel
utter their own particular cries.

What provoked
both them and the herdboy
who somewhere deep in a dim-blue hillside
keeps floating out a line of song,
is hazier than the tiny farms.

No calm is falser
than the distance's,
and working through that braying and crowing
leaves my thought in such a shambles
of dismay at human weakness and betrayal,

I almost shut myself
against the music of that single line of song.³²

Chris Mann has studied and worked in a variety of places; he is now one of the directors of the Valley Trust in Botha's Hill.

The scene of the Valley of a Thousand Hills, and the sounds of donkey, cock and herdboy, are vividly evoked. Looking and listening, the poet is depressed by the ways in which the whole scene seems to symbolize 'human weakness and betrayal': an essential aspect of the South African situation is before his eyes, and he is reminded of the great betrayal of the Christian story (it is a poem for Good Friday).

The poem also pictures a conflict within the poet. His dismay is in danger of making him insensitive to the beauty of the herdboy's song, but something within him suggests that insensitivity can never be valuable.

16. *Shabbir Banoobhai (born 1949)*

in each you
you model before me
every day
i see
beyond the chameleon of your never self
now green against my growing happiness
now brown against the dull twig of my sorrow
the still you
longing
to lose yourself
in my whoever me³³

Shabbir Banoobhai lives in Durban, where he works as an accountant.

His poems deal sensitively with a variety of themes — religion, love, society and politics. 'In each you' is a love poem which is tender, vital and subtle; in its quiet lyrical intensity it forms an interesting contrast to the more 'springy' poem by Peter Strauss.

17. *Nkathazo kaMnyayiza (born 1953)*

Forgotten People

Broken
rusty
and hanging gates
fallen leaves on unswept yards
where mangy dogs stretch out their empty beings
and where fowls peck fruitlessly at unwashed dishes
I saw him the old man on an old bench seated
leaning his old back against the crumbling mud walls
thoughts far off man's reach and sight
and like the setting sun
he gave way to the dying embers of life
and slowly he slouched into bed
with a dry and an empty stomach
to await another empty day or death.³⁴

Nkathazo kaMnyayiza lives at Mpumalanga.

This poem focuses our attention on a part of the Natal scene that many Natalians are apt to forget. Old age is often sad, and neglected; but is likely to be particularly so in a community which is itself forlorn, forgotten, marginalized. In the Natal-KwaZulu area there are many thousands of 'discarded people'.

The unbroken dragging movement of the poem suggests the old man's hopeless slipping towards death; and his condition is echoed in everything around him.

18. *Dikobe wa Mogale (born 1956)*

people

some people laugh like advertisements
with their macleans white teeth only
others with their hearts
some people maintain a boerewors status quo
with liberal cheese and wine dignity
with conservative rent 'n bakkie plastic smiles
and braai-vleis moralities
based on contraband kentucky fried thread-bare race theories
whilst others feed on malnutrition
the question is why?³⁵

Dikoba wa Mogale lives and works in Edendale, on the edge of Pietermaritzburg.

'People' is both tough and witty. The poet assails the bourgeois white world, with what he feels to be its superficiality, its commercialism, its bogus sentiments, its feeble theories, its general blindness. In contrast to it — underlying it and undermining it — is the world of black emotion and suffering. The final question suggests a militant determination not to be content with merely ironical analysis.

III

I have offered a glance at the earlier history of 'Natal literature', and I've presented and commented on a number of poems. One cannot draw large conclusions from such an impressionistic half-survey.

But it seems safe to say that Natal — or Natal-KwaZulu as it might perhaps be called today — has produced, not only complex socio-cultural clashes and interweavings, but a fair range of subtle literature. Or rather, it has provided the *site* for this literature. It is difficult to be sure in what sense Natal, which is a part both of South Africa and of the world, can claim ownership of 'Natal literature'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Albert S. Gérard, *Four African Literatures* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 182.
- ² An English translation of it has recently been published by the University of Natal Press.
- ³ Plomer did, however, meet Dube, and Gandhi's son Manilal. And van der Post has said that the three young editors of *Voorslag* intended to publish work in Zulu as well as in English and Afrikaans.
- ⁴ Campbell had been a pupil at Durban High School; so, some fourteen years earlier, had Fernando Pessoa, who went on to become the greatest modern Portuguese poet.
- ⁵ Trevor Cope (ed.), *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, collected by James Stuart, and translated by Daniel Malcolm (London, 1968), p. 89.
- ⁶ Cope, *Izibongo*, p. 88.
- ⁷ Roy Campbell, *Collected Poems: Volume 1*, (London, 1955), p. 30.
- ⁸ Campbell, *Collected Poems: Volume 1*, p. 198.
- ⁹ William Plomer, *Collected Poems* (London, 1973), p. 25.
- ¹⁰ B.W. Vilakazi, *Amal'ezulu* (Johannesburg, 1945), p. 13.
- ¹¹ F.L. Friedman, *B.W. Vilakazi: Zulu Horizons* (Johannesburg, 1973), p. 88.
- ¹² Vilakazi, *Amal'ezulu*, p. 19.
- ¹³ Friedman, *Zulu Horizons*, p. 92.
- ¹⁴ D.J. Opperman, *Negester oor Ninevé* (Cape Town, 1947), p. 8.
- ¹⁵ A.P. Grové and C.J.D. Harvey (eds.), *Afrikaans Poems with English Translations* (Cape Town, 1962), p. 235.
- ¹⁶ Opperman, *Negester oor Ninevé*, p. 28.
- ¹⁷ Grové and Harvey, *Afrikaans Poems*, p. 243.
- ¹⁸ D.J. Opperman, *Blom en Baaierd* (Cape Town, 1956), p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Grové and Harvey, *Afrikaans Poems*, p. 269.
- ²⁰ Alan Paton, *Knocking on the Door* (Cape Town, 1975), p. 70.
- ²¹ H.W.D. Manson, *Poems* (Pietermaritzburg, 1973), p. 6.
- ²² Sheila Cussons, *Plektrum* (Cape Town, 1970), p. 1.
- ²³ Jack Cope and Uys Krige (eds.), *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 230.
- ²⁴ Ina Rousseau, *Die Verlate Tuin* (Cape Town, 1954), p. 5.
- ²⁵ Grové and Harvey, *Afrikaans Poems*, p. 313.
- ²⁶ Mazisi Kunene, *Zulu Poems* (London, 1970), p. 50.
- ²⁷ Douglas Livingstone, *A Rosary of Bone* (Cape Town, 1975), p. 13.
- ²⁸ Douglas Livingstone, *The Anvil's Undertone* (Johannesburg, 1978), p. 7.
- ²⁹ Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (Johannesburg, 1971), p. 3.
- ³⁰ Peter Strauss, *Bishop Bernward's Door and other poems* (Cape Town, 1983), p. 27.
- ³¹ Mafika Pascal Gwala, *Jol'iinkomo* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 28.
- ³² Chris Mann, *First Poems* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 36.
- ³³ Shabbir Banoobhai, *Echoes of my other self* (Johannesburg, 1980), p. 15.
- ³⁴ Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor (eds.), *Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1982), p. 84.
- ³⁵ Dikobe wa Mogale, *Baptism of Fire* (Johannesburg, to be published 1984).