

sympathetically considers the value of traditional thought without falling into ethnophilosophy²⁴, indicate what is possible here, and it is in comparison to their work that Serequeberhan's must be judged. Despite its flaws, though, it is a valuable contribution which raises the level of the debate in various ways.



Words that Circle Words

Words that Circle Words. A Choice of South African Oral Poetry

edited by Jeff Opland

Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1992, 328 pp.

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To some extent the texts in this collection—or, more specifically, the way in which Jeff Opland assembles and presents them—would seem to herald, or at least coincide with, some of the concerns of post-apartheid South Africa. Not, however, for any particular ideological *engagement* they may be thought to display. At the time Opland puts together this collection (1989—the date mentioned in the *Preface*), the question of artistic (and academic) involvement in the struggle against white hegemony is arguably much more of an issue than it is in this, the aftermath of 1994, but Opland is unambiguous in his desire to prevent his own political convictions from interfering with the selections included in the anthology (p. 29). Oppression of black by white is a strong theme, particularly in the sections on work and political songs (the pass laws are a notable topic) and—more generally—in the praise poetry (the ‘modern performances’ at the end of the collection directly address issues like homeland independence, forced resettlement and worker solidarity). By and large however, the poems and songs ‘produced by South Africans at leisure, in love, working, grieving, praying, travelling, fighting and dancing’ (to quote the backflap) function at a remove from the nitty-gritty of struggle politics. Besides, as Opland remarks (p. 29):

²⁴ See *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* by Mudimbe, V. (1994) and published by Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Afrikaners protested in song against their subjection to English power a century ago just as forcibly as blacks are now protesting their frustrations under Afrikaner rule. And poems are being [were being?] produced in praise of the Matanzimas of South Africa by traditional oral poets who support their politics of collaboration, poems often bearing just as much *artistic merit* [e. a.] as some of those produced in opposition to the apartheid system.

Indeed, the political strands reflected in this volume frequently bear little—even no—resemblance to our inexorable march towards the officially proclaimed non-racial democracy. I am tempted to see in this a not insignificant critique of political correctness. Opland, for his part, singles out ‘unabashed ethnocentrism’ as a ‘hallmark’ of the oral text, and warns ‘the reader overly sensitive to sometimes excessive ethnic abuse’ to, as he puts it, ‘best lay down the book unread’ (p. 21). (To illustrate: ‘I made you look, I made you *poep*, I made you kiss a kafir cook’ goes a delightful English-speaking lullaby (p. 45), not to mention the incessant slaying, devouring and plundering of the ethnic other outrageously celebrated—to my own fragile liberal sensibilities at least—in many of the praise poems).

So just how does *Words that Circle Words* relate to our evolving political horizon? Partly, I suppose, through its timeous appearance. Although the book is published in 1992, Opland’s *Preface*, dated 1989, situates the preparation of the book at just about the end of Nelson Mandela’s period of imprisonment. ‘There is no unifying symbol in South Africa’, Opland writes in the *Introduction* (p. 24), ‘neither a flag, an anthem, nor a head of state—accepted by all its peoples, and no song that is universally popular’. With hindsight, cynicism aside, this may *now* appear unduly pessimistic. Judging by the number of bumper stickers, the flag of the new South Africa is doing fairly well (give or take a few rugby fans), even amongst those who were actually quite O K with the old. Nelson Mandela has cast his spell of *Madiba magic*, and now basks in the respect, even admiration (if not exactly political support) of the very people who had wanted to lock him up and throw away the key. In fact, an epilogue inserted, according to Opland, after the completion of the anthology, partly acknowledges these developments in its mention of South Africa entering a ‘new phase’ (p. 305), and aptly closes with a praise poem about—who else?—Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The point about the lack of a universally popular song still holds true though. Despite the SABC’s carefully stage-managed attempts during the 1995 rugby world cup, I confess to still not knowing the words of *Shozoloz*.

Quite apart from its historical opportunism, the anthology’s biggest relevance to our new atmosphere is, however, simply the ‘South African’ of its title. Given the strong anthropological flavour of its academic study, one can be excused for generally thinking of the oral text along largely ethnic

lines: Xhosa poetry (the study of which has made Opland famous), Zulu poetry, Khoi poetry etc. What exactly is meant by 'South African' is of course beset by a range of nagging theoretical questions, deftly side-stepped—this reviewer, for one, is grateful—by Opland: 'South African' basically coincides with the 'people of South Africa' (even though Opland reserves the right to occasionally extend the latter, as in the case of 'South Africans' having played an important part in the historical development of territories to have become independent countries only later on, Moshoeshe being the most famous example), people in the sense of 'inhabitants' (p. 29). Whatever its theoretical straight-forwardness, this does not mean that the term 'South African' is without problems. Here Opland runs into more or less the same dilemma as university principals, bank managers and Olympic team selectors country-wide, namely: how to get a representative mix? Three points can be made here. Firstly, Opland's inclusions are made on the basis of language, 'a system of classification that is objectively justifiable and has nothing to do with race' (p. 24)²⁵. Secondly, he limits himself to what is 'traditional' in the sense of being 'transmitted orally' (Opland likes using the term 'folklore' in this regard), the most important consequence of this decision being the *exclusion* of texts having become popular by virtue of the electronic media, for example. This would to a large extent explain the poor representation of English songs—duly acknowledged by Opland—vis-à-vis songs in our other languages. (Also, perhaps, the exclusion of someone like Mzwakhe Mbuti?). More about this aspect later on. As such, the texts of this anthology 'are designed to be received and appreciated within a relatively small social group' (p. 20). Thirdly—and, from the point of view of the reader, most significantly (even though Opland does not actually make this point)—Opland not only undermines his linguistic division ('de-ghettoises' the texts?) by mixing the texts of different linguistic provenance (there is no section of 'Zulu (language) poetry' or 'Afrikaans (language) song' for example), but effectively suspends this division altogether through the mere fact that all the texts are presented in English translation, the original-language texts being supplied in only two cases, that of the Venda *Tshikanda* songs and of the Zulu (and subsequently Afrikaans) political song, *Mayibuy'iAfrika* ('Let Africa Return').

The effect of this methodology is, unfortunately, to seriously compromise the stated aim of the book, namely to make the reader appreciate the

²⁵ Yet the division remains. Michael Chapman thus concludes the *Introduction* to his *A Century of South African Poetry* (1981): 'Until South Africans are proficiently multi-lingual, the most satisfactory arrangement would seem to be separate anthologies catering for different languages'.

'artistic merit' (see first paragraph) of the various oral texts. True, *Words that Circle Words* is a good, compact resource book on a vast subject, the introductions to the different texts (often in the words of the original collector/translator) providing important information on the socio-historical origins of a particular song or poem, frequently including interesting pointers to the circumstances of the actual performance, vital, as we know, to the very existence of the oral text. Textual annotations (particularly for the praise poems) usefully elucidate many an obscure reference. The fact that everything is presented in English obviously means that the English-speaking reader is left in no doubt as to what the text is about, not to mention the kinds of metaphor it employs. In short, our linguistic deficiencies no longer prevent us from having insight into the imagination of the oral poet.

But at what price? Opland offers no information on the translation process itself, or of difficulties encountered in its course, other than to confess to a certain degree of freedom: 'I have not hesitated to edit the translations of others ...'. This liberty he justifies in the light of his motive to have the texts 'appeal to the reader *as poetry*' (e.a.)—'scholarly accuracy' or 'literalness' are of secondary concern. One can therefore assume the translations to be adequate versions of what we may call the *linguistic content* of the texts, a linguistic content which, 'however compelling might be the constraints inhibiting a full appreciation of their [the texts'] original character as oral performances' (p. 19), Opland nevertheless sees as more or less equal to the task of conveying artistic appreciation. In this vein he invites us to 'read [the poems] as they are heard, in a rush, with an ear for the rhetorical patternings and an openness to the power of the imaginative language' (p. 20).

Now, the problem is that this 'imaginative language' abounds with phrases that, to my English-accustomed ear, often sound hopelessly contrived, if not downright ridiculous. Herewith some random examples:

That such a beautiful woman should belong to a senior! (p. 49) - Xhosa

There lies the thing, O alla! (p. 98) - Afrikaans

Do I fear to pitch down a pit? (p. 131) - Zulu

She doesn't wee she shooshes. / Splasher in the Ngcobo's potty. (p. 152) - Zulu

Oh, the horse has no village-community! (p. 161) - Sotho

He's a fart who expels wind / whose bum puckered as his guts ballooned ...
(p. 182) - Xhosa

After you fucked your own mother / Where in hell did you think to find succour?
(p. 218) - Xhosa

He hit the horse setting out with the men / How nice! How nice! How nice!
(p. 248) - Ndebele

As it is today - yes! - we invoke the Zizi / Of Sijadu, of Furry Penis-sheath, / Of
Tasselled Penis-sheath - yes! (p. 256) - Xhosa

Admittedly the above phrases are here offered completely out of context. Then again, I find it hard to imagine a context in which they would fit, in which they would not be profoundly *inimical* to the kind of ‘openness to the imaginative language’ Opland invites us to. The point is that they simply do not do justice to the artistic context of the texts in this anthology. As I remarked earlier, this is not to say that the quality of the translation itself (as transcription of linguistic meaning) is necessarily in question. But I would advance that the kinds of connotations and nuances attaching to the above phrases when expressed in their original language are simply impossible to render in English. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the artistic appreciation of the English-speaking reader would be better served if he *didn't know* the linguistic meaning of these phrases. *Words that Circle Words* boasts a number of first translations (notably of the nineteenth century Xhosa praise poems assembled by the Rev. W.B. Rubusana), of major importance, no doubt, for scholarship. From the point of view of artistic merit, however, the songs and poems in the collection are, quite simply, *overtranslated*.

Somewhat ironically, Opland opens the anthology with a prologue—the title poem—in which the unequal relation between linguistic meaning and poetic appreciation is illustrated with great skill. In his response to a performance of the Xhosa oral poet David Manisi (entitled ‘Homage to David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi’), the poet Patrick Cullinan writes (p. 33):

Now hear Manisi in his praising.
 the words that circle words.
 You have the skill, Imbongi,
 And yet this tongue
 I hardly understand.
 I say you do,
 but do not make your song:
 your poem calls back.
 It is
 and is not memory. Your words
 beat time, they drum
 and circle round each other

Opland is far from insensitive to the implication of these words. ‘Patrick Cullinan invokes his own cultural traditions in his reaction to Manisi’s praise poem, the words of which he does not understand, and with sensitivity he finds common ground’, he reflects in the *Introduction* (p. 27). Earlier he offers the standard apology for committing (reducing) the oral performance (which is a social *act*) to the written word (which is a lifeless *object*), concluding that ‘[t]he problem is insurmountable’ (p. 18). Against this

background, and if we concede, furthermore, the artistic inadequacy of rendering linguistic meaning as per English translation, Opland's objective to present the oral text for its artistic merit, as poetry in the full sense of the word, becomes positively arrogant. Then again, given that *Words that Circle Words* is a book, with a certain brief and within certain physical confines (300 pages, for example), intended to be read by people who are accustomed to appreciating poetry through that medium (and indeed *prefer* it that way), could it really have been better?

As far as the socio-historical context of the individual texts is concerned, Opland's brief annotations are on the whole appropriate. Within the artistic perspective that he adopts, annotation can be distracting; the poems should be allowed to 'speak for themselves' (p. 20). And yet what is to my mind the most fundamental aspect of orality, namely its existence in *sound*, the fact that it is by definition an *aural* medium, a language that is always *heard*, could conceivably have been integrated into the structure of the anthology without undue distortion.

As it turns out the aural nature of oral poetry is the one aspect almost totally ignored by Opland, with no more than two or three references to features of sound in the entire collection. Of course, this lack could to some extent be addressed through annotation—indications of pitch, tone, tempo—although these would hardly benefit poetic appreciation. An obvious strategy would furthermore be to provide the reader with the melodies of the songs. But it is the retention of the text in the original language (or at least parts of it where the text—like some praise poems—is relatively long), which would constitute the most significant gain. Firstly, it would credit those readers who have the necessary linguistic skills to understand at least some of the non-English texts in the original—the case of the overwhelming majority of South Africans. Notwithstanding Opland's high-powered international standing (currently teaching at Charterhouse, England, Opland is an Honorary Professorial Research Associate of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London), surely the book is *also* intended for them? Secondly, even a purely phonetic reading of a language not at all understood would at the very least enable the reader to pick up patterns of repetition and rhythm obscured in the translated text. (In the case of the *Tshikanda* songs where the original version of the chorus is retained, Opland concedes this very point.) Thirdly, the presence of the original language would, from an aesthetic point of view, have the effect of 'dignifying' the linguistic meaning in those cases where the English translation presents it as absurd, even where, once again, the reader has no knowledge of the original language. This point goes to the core of what I would contend to be the essential *difference* of linguistic meaning in the oral context, namely that oral linguistic meaning is *more* than the 'meaning of the words' (as abstracted

signifiers arbitrarily associated with signifieds—see the structuralist (Ferdinand de Saussure) and indeed ‘post-structuralist’ (Jacques Derrida) view of language), but that it is linguistic meaning informed, as it were, by semiological structures that Western scholarship has come—in the light of a certain linguistic experience—to simplistically categorise as *extra*-linguistic: affective or symbolical sound, sometimes also called ‘musical’. Oral linguistic meaning is, perhaps, *fundamentally* aural-linguistic meaning²⁶.

To conclude this review, it may be appropriate to offer a few further reflections on the ‘mix’ Opland presents us with, more specifically on the relatively poor representation of English. The poetry section of the volume is dominated by Xhosa (a fact explained by Opland’s own expertise in this area), with significant contributions in the other African (‘Black’) languages. Afrikaans has only one entry, namely Piet Draghoender’s *Klaaglied* (‘Lament’), English has none. ‘South African oral poetry’, Opland tells us, ‘... is of one type. It is praise poetry (also referred to by scholars as eulogy or panegyric)’ (p. 25). Fair enough. English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans have simply not produced this kind of poetry, at least not in the ‘traditional’ sense—important to Opland—of transmission by word of mouth. (Piet Draghoender’s *Klaaglied* is one of a kind, it ‘defies classification’, p. 25). But what about songs? Once again, English fares badly. There is, as Opland points out, the matter of scholarly attention to consider. Scholars have on the whole concentrated on the African languages, with at least some attention being paid to Afrikaans (particularly, perhaps, within the context of a once nascent Afrikaner nationalism). English, by contrast, has received none, largely because, as Opland contends, ‘English songs sung in South Africa ... are by and large the common inheritance of English-speaking people all over the world, and do not appear to have been adapted to local conditions or to have established an indigenous South African tradition’ (p. 21f). Hence the paltry number of English songs, fully three of which are contributed by people in Opland’s immediate entourage (his children Daniel and Samantha, and his sister, Beryl Eden).

The question arises: how hard did he try? Opland quotes lengthy passages from Ralph Trehwela’s *Song Safari: A Journey Through Light Music in South Africa* (1980) and from a 1987 letter he received from Gareth Cornwell, Chief Curator of the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, both making the point that an authentic South African English *vox pupili* (in the words of Cornwell) hardly exists. Maybe this is true. On the other hand, it may also be that Opland’s insistence on ‘folklore’ (texts transmitted orally in relatively small-scale communities) effectively pro-

²⁶ See Alant, JW 1996. *Beyond Traditional Literature: Towards Oral Theory as Aural Linguistics*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Natal, Durban.

scribes the *very possibility* of South African English songs. Perhaps English-speaking South Africans simply do not happen to live in the kinds of communities Opland would regard as a fertile breeding ground for 'folklore'. The problem is that such an assessment, reinforced by the 'obvious' absence of oral cultural genres (in the specialised sense of praise poetry and different types of songs, all related to a particular aspect of human activity), all too often play right into the conceptualisations of simplistic dichotomies, the most famous, at least as far as orality is concerned, being 'orality vs literacy', most strongly developed in the writings of Walter Ong. True, it has become fashionable to question this dichotomy. (Ruth Finnegan has been consistent in her critique of it; powerful objections have also come from Stephen Feld, Karin Barber, Leroy Vail and Landeg White.) All the same it is extremely difficult to avoid, and the average reader will most certainly find it (even if Opland does not present it as such) in *Words that Circle Words*. Why are there so few South African English songs? Because out of all the South African linguistic divisions, English speakers are the least traditional, the most modern, the most literate

Despite my own theoretical objections to orality/literacy, I have also thought along such lines. As I said, it is difficult to avoid. But occasionally the best challenge to theories comes around when one isn't looking for it, when one is 'relaxing'. I chanced upon an evening with the Blarney Bro's (a guitar-playing, folk-singing duo popular around Durban) a couple of weeks ago. The setting: the Athlone Hotel in Durban North, in a lavish tent named 'The Barn'. The decor: appropriately 'American-cowboy' (or an attempt at it): heavy wooden benches, stacks of hay. Lots of smoke. Lots of booze.

The first thing that surprised me was the crowd of people. Not bad for a working day. Then the people themselves surprised me. I was prepared for a typical non-participatory audience, small groups sitting around tables sipping long drinks, breaking into polite applause at the end of each song. Oral theory had told me that audience participation is a big thing in traditional cultures, then dwindles—disappears—as social roles become increasingly specialised, as people move—to employ Ong's terminology—from being event-orientated (auditory synthesis) to being object-orientated (visualist synthesis). And yet there was very little of that. The BMW's safely immobilised and the cell phones momentarily out of earshot, these middle-of-the-road swimming-pool-and-security suburbanites set about their *heidi-hi* and *heidi-ho's* ('aural patterns'?), their refrains, their call-and-responses. And there was spontaneous dancing (from the start, no exhortations necessary), not on a specially demarcated dance-floor, but right there in the aisles, amongst the chairs and tables, sometimes even on them. I recognised John Denver's *Grandma's featherbed*. Memorable.

So they didn't necessarily know the words of the songs. And none of

the songs (a mixture of what seemed to be Country-and-Western and Irish folk) was in any way 'indigenous' to South Africa. Yet it struck me that something in the *performance*, the way in which these songs were celebrated, the dancing, the fake American ranch vibe, was, maybe, authentically South African. At any rate the people around me were 'people of South Africa', inhabitants. And for what it's worth, the kind of scene-setting that I indulge in above would not have been inappropriate (minus the light bulbs and white faces) had it featured amongst the introductions to the texts in Opland's collection. Maybe the day will come that an oral anthology that affords itself the epithet 'South African', will also give account of cultural events such as these.

The Grotesque in Literature?

Literature and the Grotesque

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Those of us who feel that the relationship between literature and the grotesque is an area of crucial importance for the whole field of literary (and cultural) studies, and that this area has not received anything like the attention that it really deserves, primarily since it has all sorts of implications both theoretical and practical for the way in which we constitute the field, are bound to feel disappointed and perhaps a little cheated by this anthology of essays published last year. Certainly the title suggests something far more definitive than what we actually have—to the extent that there may be a trades description problem here. Meyer's anthology is far too disparate a collection that does not hang together all that well; it certainly does not have anything like the cohesion one would expect of an anthology with this title. The quality of the two-and-a-bit-page introduction (which I would characterise as 'very poor') only serves to confirm this judgement. The introduction fails to provide anything like the overview or theoretical