B.W. Vilakazi: The Poet as Inspired Prophet

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> As symptomatic structures, works of art preserve certain homologies with the social and economic structures of their time, and are important sources of information about human history: every work of art is, *inter alia*, an important social document, and it is foolish to think that it can be somehow 'above' such things. On the other hand, art can be seen as something we understand better by its being approached through a prior consideration of facts surrounding its birth (Thurley 1983:5).

In the wake of revisionist approaches to South African literary history evident in the recently published books and journal articles on South African literary history[1], perhaps the time has come for a re-appraisal of the achievements and significance of those black writers who, for socio-political and ideological reasons, were relegated to a marginal position in relation to the English-dominated South African literary establishment. C.F. Swanepoel's (1996:20) comments on the peripheral status of African-language literature(s) alert us to the urgency of reviewing the underpinning assumptions of Southern African literary historiography:

> There seems to exist a South African literary history of which African-language literature is not part, and consequently finds itself in a position of marginality. Put differently, there seems to exist a South(ern) African literature in African languages which is either not (yet) regarded as part of South African literary history, or has not (yet) been described sufficiently to fit into the wider South African context.

In a similar vein, the literary historian Albert Gérard (1993:64), reminds us of the crucial role that literary scholars can play during this time of fundamental social transformation and reconstruction in South Africa:

> ... in this polyethnic, plurilingual country and at this decisive moment in history, they

[1] Recent books on South African literary history include Chapman (1996); Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) and Smit et al. (1996).

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> [literary scholars] are summoned to an even more crucial task: to help cure the traditional divisiveness by making each single human group aware of the scope and magnitude, and of the depth and subtlety in the literary achievements of the other groups. By thus fostering cultural understanding and mutual esteem, they will contribute their proper share to the necessary building up of a cohesive nation.

Whether we (as South African literary scholars) regard nations as 'imagined communities' with no empirical existence or as social groups with shared and definitive characteristics, we would be shirking our social responsibility if we ignored the challenge of fostering cultural understanding and tolerance among the various social groups that constitute the emerging South African 'nation'.

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, the Zulu literary scholar, novelist and poet who is generally regarded as the founder of modern Zulu poetry[2] belongs to the group of mainly mission-educated writer-intellectuals most of whom wrote in both their native languages and English. This group includes such writers and critics as J.J.R. Jolobe, S.E.K. Mqhayi. H.I.E. Dhlomo and R.R.R. Dhlomo. Before his premature death at the age of 42 in 1947, Vilakazi had published two volumes of poetry: *Inkondlo KaZulu* (1935) and *Amal'ezulu* (1945). In 1973 Vilakazi's poems were rendered into English by Florence Louie Friedman from the literal translations of the Zulu poems by D. McK. Malcolm and J.M. Sikakana[3]. Apart from creative writing, Vilakazi also wrote a handful of scholarly critical essays the most frequently cited of which is the one entitled 'The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu' which was part of a thesis accepted by the University of the Witwatersrand for the M.A. degree in 1938. Vilakazi's doctoral thesis, accepted by the department of Bantu studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1945, was entitled *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni*. As Gérard (1993:61) has pointed out, Vilakazi's thesis 'has the distinction of treating literature in two different, although related, languages, Xhosa and Zulu, simultaneously'. Thus in the work of Vilakazi we have a classic example of a scholar-poet who reflected in a sustained and systematic manner on the technical, aesthetic and mythological foundations of imaginative writing in Zulu. However, in spite of his obvious versatility as a writer and critic it is in the field of poetry that Vilakazi made his most distinctive contribution to Zulu literature.

My concern in this chapter is to offer a socio-critical evaluation of a selection

[2] See Nyembezi (1961:7); Ntuli (1984:1); Malcolm (1949:38); Bang (1951:524) and A.T. Cope (1984:14).

[3] All quotations in this chapter have been taken from Florence Louie Friedman's translations in *Zulu Horizons* (1973). Quotations of the original Zulu versions of the poems are from *Izinkondlo zika B.W. Vilakazi* (1993) edited by D.B.Z. Ntuli abbreviated as *Izinkondlo*.

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of Vilakazi's poems in which he examines the sources of his poetic inspiration and foregrounds what he considers to be his social roles and obligations as a 'modern' Zulu poet. Thus the central focus of my discussion will be on those poems that Adrian Koopman has aptly described as 'inspirational poems'. Koopman (1980:3) further points out that in these poems Vilakazi 'seeks not only to discover himself as a Zulu, but to find out what it is that inspires him to write poetry'. In spite of his desire, expressed in some of his poems, to be seen as following the tradition of Zulu oral poets (*izimbongi*), Vilakazi seems to have been aware of his role as a poet of the written word as distinct from the oral poets such as Mshongweni, Magolwane KaMkhathini, Mxhamama KaNtendeka and other royal poets who sang the praises of Zulu kings[4]. As I hope to show, Vilakazi's poems and his critical writings reflect his awareness of the inherent contradictions underlying the challenging task of having to ensure the continuity and preservation of Zulu traditions while simultaneously devising new strategies and forms of poetic expression to suit the modern context.

Focusing on the role of the poet as a witness and participant in the process of cultural transformation, my analysis of the poems dealing with the subject of the poetic imagination and the poet's social roles will take into account Vilakazi's self-conception as the poet whose task is to preserve the cultural heritage of his people. As C.L.S. Nyembezi (1973:xix) rightly points out:

> He [Vilakazi] was gravely concerned lest the Zulu heritage be lost to the younger generations. In his poems he refers over and over again to the need for preserving those things which are sacred and precious to the Zulu nation.

This view is confirmed by Vilakazi himself in the poem entitled 'I Hear A Singing ...' (Ngizw' ingoma):

> *Ingoma yenu ngiqale ngayizwa,*
> *Ngayizwa ngayeya ngokungazi,*
> *Namuhla sengiyayiqonda ngiyayithobela.*

[4] For a discussion of Zulu national poets see Ngubane (1951); Gunner (1984); Cope (1968); and Rycroft & Ngcobo (1988). In *Zulu Horizons* Friedman (cf. Nyembezi 1973:77) comments as follows on the role of the traditional *imbongi*: 'The Zulu word *imbongi* has been translated as "poet"; but this is inadequate because the *imbongi*, in addition to being the tribal poet laureate, is the chief's official praise-singer. He must therefore be familiar with tribal history and background and know too the idiosyncrasies and personal habits of the chief or king or hero whom he praises. The *imbongi* is also expected to have memorized the praises of several generations of tribal chiefs whose songs would have been taught to him by word of mouth by his predecessor.

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Laph' amazw' enu engqongq' esifubeni,
Eloloz' ezibilini zozwel' oludala
Enilutape KwaZulu neduka nomhlaba,
Ningikhumbuz' okungasekho
Nengingenamandl' okukubamba
Noma sengikhal' ezimaconsi (Ntuli 1993:74f).

When first I heard our tribal songs
They seemed to me of little worth;
But now their message echoes in my heart.
Secrets and timeless passions haunt a lilt
Inspired by Zululand's sons and their traditions.
These songs recall a past so swiftly fading
That now I fear its meaning may elude me
Although I weep with longing to preserve it (Vilakazi 1973:33).

In examining Vilakazi's chosen roles as the custodian of cultural values and an intermediary between the dominant Western culture and the 'swiftly fading' Zulu culture, I shall be guided by the central propositions of Lucien Goldmann's theory known as genetic structuralism the key principles of which are explained by Terry Eagleton (1976:33f) in the following terms:

> What Goldmann is seeking ... is a set of structural relations between literary text, world vision and history itself. He wants to show how the historical situation of a social group or class is transposed, by the mediation of its world vision, into the structure of a literary work. To do this it is not enough to begin with the text and work outwards to history, or vice versa; what is required is a dialectical method of criticism which moves constantly between text, world vision and history, adjusting each to the others.

It is my hope that this discussion will serve to illuminate interconnections between historical context and textual production as exemplified by Vilakazi's poetry. As the anthropologist and critic, Absalom Vilakazi (1975:134f) explains in a review of *Zulu Horizons*, Vilakazi (the poet) would, in all probability, have thought of his poetic talent as having been shaped in various ways by his social environment:

> While Vilakazi did not elaborate a social theory of literature, he would have agreed with the proposition that the poet springs from the bosom of his social group and therefore reflects the historical social experiences of that group. That this was indeed his perception of a poet as 'the voice of his people' is shown by the fact that he sought inspiration from 'waiting outside the palisades of Dukuza'. It was from here that he heard his people saying: 'Be our voice'.

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What the literary sociologist Lucien Goldmann (1980:112) refers to as the 'world vision' or 'world view' evolves from any social group's attempts to create a meaningful and coherent value system out of its material and social circumstances:

> World views are historical and social facts. They are totalities of ways of thinking, feeling and acting which in given conditions are imposed on men (sic) finding themselves in a similar economic and social situation.

As I shall argue, Vilakazi's poetry presents a world vision characterised by both discrepancies and interpenetration between African 'traditionalism' and Western 'modernity'. The poet and the social group(s)—defined in terms of ethnicity, race, and class—whose outlook he attempts to articulate in his poetry, have to adapt to the demands of a modern existence while simultaneously endeavouring to retain what they see as the essential features of their indigenous cultural identity. Consequently, Vilakazi's poetry reflects the dilemmas and uncertainties of a poet caught between the hegemonic literary practices and ideologies of Western culture and the traditional myths, beliefs and cultural practices of his native culture. This tension is also evident in Vilakazi's attempts to combine traditional forms with Western ones, as well in his constant invocation of the protective and inspirational spirits of the ancestors while showing equal respect for the basic doctrines of the Christian religion. Thus social institutions such as religion, education and tribal traditions and belief systems provide a framework, or, as Goldmann would say, the 'englobing structure' within which Vilakazi's poetry may be interpreted. In line with his self-portrayal as a preserver of culture, the world view which is given prominence in Vilakazi's poetry is that of the traditional Zulu community, the essential features of which are outlined by Absalom Vilakazi (1965:136):

> There were certain presuppositions in the culture which were of fundamental importance for the general well-being of everybody, the unity of the lineage and its patterns of mutuality and reciprocity, the supremacy of ancestral spirits ... and the certainty that old traditional methods of rearing children or of enculturation would make for cultural stability. This ensured the acceptance of a common world view, a common tribal sentiment, common allegiances and common interests[5].

However, it is worth pointing out that the 'world views' of the social groups presented in Vilakazi's poetry are neither consistent nor homogenous, instead they are characterised by inherent contradictions and ambiguities. For instance, Vilakazi sees himself and would like to be seen by his readers as a spokesperson of a circumscribed ethnic

[5] On the various aspects of the Zulu world view, see also Krige's (1936) study of traditional Zulu culture.

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group, yet the concept of the nation in his poetry does not consistently refer to the ethnic group of which he is a member. Whereas in some of his poems he deliberately constructs personae who assume the stance of mission-educated Africans who appreciate the utilitarian value of Western education and religion, in other poems he portrays the collective plight of the urbanised Africans caught in the intricate web of racial oppression and proletarianisation[6]. Evidently, Vilakazi's poetry raises complex questions regarding issues of nationalism, ethnicity, class and contending ideologies.

Furthermore, a careful reading of Vilakazi's poetry reveals the various ways in which he consciously resisted the attitudes and values that most commentators have attributed to the class of educated (Westernised and predominantly Christian) blacks during the first part of this century. Gail Gerhart's (1978:34) comment on the values of the emergent black bourgeoisie is typical[7]:

> Though not cut off from contact with traditional society, this African elite was in many ways alienated from traditional customs and norms. A belief in the superiority of Western culture was basic to its world view, and its goals were unabashedly assimilationist. Having come through the experience of missionary boarding schools, it was well steeped in the liberal and Christian presumptions which prevailed in these institutions, including the optimistic liberal faith in the inevitability of progress.

Vilakazi's poetry tells a slightly different story: that some 'educated' Africans attempted to counter the influence of liberal humanism with their own historicised version of 'African humanism'[8]. Thus instead of seeing Western culture as superior to his own native culture Vilakazi saw the two cultures as epistemologically different yet complimentary. Thus Vilakazi may be credited not only with having blazed the trail for Zulu

[6] Gunner (1988:224) comments as follows on the conception of the 'African' in Vilakazi's most anthologised poem, 'Ezinkomponi': 'It is clear that although Vilakazi refers specifically to past Zulu victories he uses the references as emblems of a wider, confident African past. In his thoughts for the future, his reference to "rightful Black hands" expresses a longing for a broader African repossession of the land and an inheritance that is far more than narrowly Zulu. His vision is both regional and national, and in an important way he is able to embrace both rural and urban sensibilities. This is rare among South African writers of any race'.

[7] See for instance, Couzens (1985); Magubane (1979); Marks (1986) and Bundy (1979) for a discussion of class divisions within the black communities during the first part of the twentieth century.

[8] Vilakazi's response to what was perceived to be an inherently superior culture and lifestyle, is to show, in his poetry, that Zulu cultural practices and institutions have an inherent value and social utility. This is a creative way of humanising and redeeming a discredited value system. Although Vilakazi may not have seen it in these terms, this is a political act with far-reaching ideological implications.

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modern poets but also with having succeeded in the difficult task of combining two culturally and aesthetically different conceptions of poetry. Writing in the modern era of the 1930s and 1940s, Vilakazi attempted to re-define the role of the poet as an inspired interpreter of his people's collective experience as well as the chosen mouthpiece of the ancestors. As D.B.Z. Ntuli (1984:102) puts it:

> In most of the poems in which Vilakazi attributes inspiration to some spiritual source he elevates the spirit and humbles himself. He regards himself as a mere tool through which the spirit can work.

Perhaps the most glaring gap in the criticism of Vilakazi's poetry is in the area of Zulu mythology and belief system and how these inform and underpin his poetry. A cursory reading of Vilakazi's poems reveals that he had a profound grasp of and appreciation for the beliefs and myths of the Zulu nation and that he tried to examine his own role as a poet within the context of these cultural elements. However, any assessment of Vilakazi's poetry also has to take into account the very powerful influence of Christian values and Western education on Vilakazi as a young man and later as a scholar and writer. Most critics who have written on Vilakazi's development as a writer and critic stress the crucial role missionary education played in shaping his poetic vision and stimulating his love for education. A typical comment in this regard is that made by C.L.S. Nyembezi (1973:xvii):

> As a student at Marianhill, Vilakazi acted as secretary to Father Bernard Huss. It was probably this association more than any other factor that influenced Vilakazi ever more strongly to seek distant educational horizons.

While the influence of Catholic priests had its own discernible effect in shaping Vilakazi's artistic consciousness and moral vision, he seems to have deliberately chosen to recognise both Christian values and traditional African values as equally valid sources of inspiration.

In her incisive study of class and nationalism in twentieth-century Natal, Shula Marks has shown that there were distinct material and ideological differences between the non-converted traditionalists and the Westernised *kholwa* community or the so-called '*ama*respectables'. However instead of emphasising the ideological consistency of the newly acquired world view, Marks highlights what she rightly describes as the 'ambiguities' characteristic of the behaviour patterns and cultural outlook of the *kholwa* community. For instance, it may seem anomalous, if not plainly self-contradictory, that the educated and Christianised Vilakazi would think of himself as an inspired messenger of the national ancestors. However, the phenomenon of

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'deculturation'[9] which Daniel Kunene regards as a feature of the outlook displayed by mission-educated African writers who assume, often unconsciously, the perspective of the colonialist, hardly applies to Vilakazi, nor does the following rather reductive comment made by David Westlely (1979:9):

> ... for the literate Zulu of the first half of the twentieth century, Christianity becomes, paradoxically, the foundation of Zulu morality, of *ubuntu*, 'Zulu-hood' or simply, human dignity.

Instead of seeing Vilakazi as one of the 'decultured' Africans, he should be credited for his successful attempts to utilise the liberal-Christian ideology in his endeavour to promote his own culture. Apparently, Vilakazi was aware of the extent of the cultural and moral discord between what may be broadly described as African traditionalism on the one hand, and Western modernity on the other hand, and seems to have understood the challenges this posed for the writer whose aim is to explore the underlying myths, beliefs and symbols of his culture while relying on the standard conventions of Western poetry to perform this task. As he put it in an article published three years after the appearance of his first volume of poems:

> There is no doubt that the poetry of the West will influence all Bantu poetry because all the new ideas of our age have reached us through European standards. But there is something we must not lose sight of. If we imitate the form, the outward decoration which decks the charming poetry of our Western masters, that does not mean to say that we have incorporated into our poetry even their spirit. If we use Western stanza-forms and metrical system we employ them only as vehicles or receptacles for our poetic images, depicted as we see and conceive (Vilakazi 1938:127).

That Vilakazi attempted to imitate the 'form' of Western poetry in his first collection was noticed by the Xhosa poet and critic D.D.T. Jabavu (1943:11) who commented as follows in his review of *Inkondlo KaZulu*:

> When we come to the poetry book *Inkondlo KaZulu* by B. W. Vilakazi we come to the one great book of poetry in Zulu that attains to the rank of a classic. It is English influence *in excelsis*, by reason of its outright imitation of English modes (metres long, short and common; all varieties of stanzas, elegaics, sonnets, rhymes, and even

[9] Daniel Kunene (1989:19) defines deculturation as follows: 'By deculturation is meant the process whereby a people is pressured into developing a negative self-image and consequently rejecting its own cultural identity. This opens the way for an aggressive acculturation that assumes the inferiority of the decultured group and the superiority of the acculturating group'.

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> the heroic couplet reminiscent of Pope and Dryden) all punctiliously observed. Even the titles remind one of Keats in disguising their subject, ensuring that *ars artem celare est*.

Both in his choice of topics and in his deployment of poetic techniques, Vilakazi's first volume of poetry reflects the influence of the British Romantic poets[10]. As suggested above, Vilakazi would argue that the poems in *Inkondlo KaZulu* reflect the influence of European 'form' in the poetic presentation of a recognisably African 'content'.

In *Amal'ezulu* Vilakazi dispenses with European poetic techniques such as rhyme and metre and begins to imitate the style of the Zulu *izibongo*. As Cope (1984:17) observes:

> In *Amal'ezulu* Vilakazi leaves behind his duty to tradition [British Romantic tradition] and advances to the fulfilment of his romantic temperament under the guidance of his personal muse, which he slowly realises to be a Zulu muse. He becomes what he had wanted to be and what he had tried to be in his historical poems, the voice of the Zulu people; but now he speaks not from the relatively recent and specific standpoint of Shaka, but from the depths of the Zulu experience.

It is in this collection that the reader finds most of the poems in which Vilakazi reflects on his own role as a poet. In 'Power of Inspiration' the speaker describes an episode in which the aspirant poet, probably Vilakazi himself, seeks admission to king Shaka's court in Dukuza. After what seems to be an interminable waiting period he is finally invited to enter. While inside the palace, he falls asleep and has a dream in which he is entrusted with the task of being a national poet by a woman who is arguably the most powerful female figure in Zulu history, Shaka's aunt, Mnkabayi. After this encounter with Mnkabayi, the poet, like a trainee diviner (*ithwasa*), has no option but to carry out the sacred tasks assigned to him by the ancestors. The poet's words suggest that he is *destined* to bear the heavy yet spiritually rewarding burden of being the voice of his people:

> *Namhla kangikwaz' ukuthula noma*
> *Lapho ngilele ngikwesikaBhadakazi,*
> *Ngivuswa NguMnkabayi ethi kimi:*
> *'Vuka wena kaMancinza!*

[10] It has become a critical commonplace to regard Vilakazi as a Zulu Romantic Poet. Cope's (1984:14) comment is typical of this view: 'Vilakazi was a romantic by temperament and his first poems were odes to the wind, birds and flowers, even to a Zulu clay pot (Grecian Urn), very much in the style of, in fact in imitation of, the English Romantic poets'.

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Kawuzalelwanga ukulal' ubuthongo.
Vuk' ubong' indaba yemikhonto!
Nank' umthwal' engakwethwesa wona' (Ntuli 1993:142).

Thus now I can never be silent
Because in the depths of the night
Mnkabayi arouses me saying:
'Arise, O you son of Mancinza!
Your destiny bids you waken
And sing to us legends of battle:
This charge, I command you, fulfil!' (Vilakazi 1973:77).

Combining partly realistic and partly visionary modes, this poem describes the complex process of initiation which the poet had undergone before assuming his place among the national poets. Moreover, it is most significant that the poet does not seek legitimation from any nameless muse but from king Shaka's court as this implies that his status and authority as a poet have been conferred by the leader and founder of the Zulu nation. Thus instead of presenting himself in the typical Romantic tradition as the individualised voice for whom poetry is a creative response to the feelings of solitude and alienation, Vilakazi portrays the task of writing poetry as a sacred duty which has a national significance. Significantly, the poet's visionary encounter with the representative of the national ancestors (Mnkabayi) takes the form of a dream. As Krige (1936:299-310), Msimang (1975:304) and Berglund (1989:136) have shown, dreams are a very important means by which ancestors communicate with the living, especially with those they have selected for the sacred task of divination (*ubungoma*). It is also worth noting that Mnkabayi instructs the newly initiated poet to write poems about the heroic achievements of the Zulu nation: 'Sing to us legends of battle'. Therefore, poems such as 'UShaka KaSenzangakhona', 'Khalani maZulu', 'NgoMbuyazi eNdondakusuka' and other historical poems may be seen as the poet's response to this ancestral injunction.

The role of the spirits in Vilakazi's inspirational poems is not confined to the recovery of the heroic past; Vilakazi envisions his own role as an ancestor who will return in the form of dreams to inspire the younger generation of the artistically inclined. As he puts it in 'In Celebration of Fifty Years' (*Isenanelo eminyakeni engamashumi mahlanu*):

Siyobuya njengomoya
Wamathongo namadlozi,
Sifukamel' isikole.
Lapho wena mfana uzwa

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Umoy' uwahlaz' ihlamvu,
Ophahleni ebusuku-
Yebo kobe kuyithina,
Sikuphuphis' amaphupho
Amamathekis' ingane

...
Bosukuma mfan' uvuke
Uthath' usib' oluloba
Umcabango nezindaba
Esiyokunika zona,
Sizithol' emathongweni
AwoFulansi noNgcayi
Eminyakeni ezayo
Engamashum' ayisihlanu (Ntuli 1993:128f).

Then shall we all in truth return
And, like our own ancestral spirits,
Become the guardian angels of the college.
Therefore, young reader, hear my voice
In echoing winds that stir the leaves
And whisper in the night around the house!—
For thus do we come back again
And bring to you the blessed dreams
That cause an infant's smile;

...
Therefore, young reader, wake and rise!—
Take up your pen that you may write
The thoughts with which we now infuse you,
Inspired in us by noble spirits
Of men like Francis and Ngcayi,
That children yet unborn may read them
Fifty years from now (Vilakazi 1973:73f).

The deliberate juxtaposition of traditional symbols and images with those associated with modernity in this poem is indicative of the commingling of two formerly disparate world views. Significantly, the ancestors guarding the Catholic school where Vilakazi studied include both the white missionaries and Christian Zulus. Thus the idea of ancestral inspiration is shrewdly re-interpreted to include recognisably Christian beliefs.

In 'Higher Education', a poem with an overtly autobiographical orientation, Vilakazi expresses the view that his acquisition of Western education has reinforced

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his status as the pioneer of Zulu creative writing. In an unusually prescient and prophetic manner, he anticipates his own immortality as a literary figure and gives credit for all his achievements to the national ancestors who offered him the necessary guidance and inspiration and gave him access to knowledge which will be useful to future generations:

Ngibon' amagama esizwe sonke.
Amehl' amadloz' angibhekile;
Amathong' abeke nezihlangu,
Alalele ngaphansi komhlaba,
Athi mangingene ngikhothiswe
Ukhamba ngoba ngingakhohlwanga.

Ngikhothe ngadla ngabek' ethala,
Ngibekel' usapho lwakwaZulu,
Lusale lukhoth' ezincwadini,
Luxabane lodwa luchazana
Nezint' engazibhala ebesuku,
Ngingazange ngizisukele ngibhale,
Ngibeleselwe yinina mathong' ohlanga,
Ningixabanis' ingqond' ebusuku.
Kuleyo nkathi ngiyobe sengafa (Ntuli 1993:148).

I think of heroes of my nation,
I see ancestral eyes regard me
And spirits put aside their shields
As, from beds of earth, they speak
To tell me I shall share their beer-
For never shall I be forgotten.

I gained degrees, I wrote my books,
That other children of Zululand
Might taste one day my fruits of knowledge,
Study, debate and help each other
While learning from my nightly writings.
These, never inspired by mere ambition,
Were prompted by you, ancestral spirits
Who stirred my thoughts in hours of darkness:
But I shall be here no longer (Vilakazi 1973:83).

The themes of creativity and ancestral inspiration are further explored in 'The Poet' (*Imbongi*). In this poem the speaker has been appropriately initiated into the commu-

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nity of praise-poets and assigned the role of an intermediary between the living and the departed. As he says:

Konje ngabe yim' engikhulumayo,
Noma ngabe nguwe Thongo likaMbongi?
Ngabe ngizwe kahle noma ngiyahlongozelwa?
Ngingakazalwa umhlaba wawungenandlela;
Ungaziwa, ungaqondakali, ngawubamba.
Ngizwe umemeza, Mbongi, phambi kwami,
Wangihola ngodondolo ngingaboni, ngabona.
Ngidedele ngibonge, ngivul' indlela nami
KwaMhlaba (Ntuli 1993:143).

O how can I capture thoughts which haunt me now?
Are these my words or yours, O deathless Muse?
And do I voice the truth or fatuous nonsense?
Before you claimed my soul, the earth was dark,
Pathless, mysterious: then I, inspired by you,
Could open my ears to singers of the past,
And grasping the poet's staff, pursue his path.
O let my songs as well, blaze trails on earth! (Vilakazi 1973:78).

Significantly, the 'muse' alluded to in this poem is not a particular spiritual being but a universal figure who inspires and sustains all poets. Yet even this universal muse is described within the context of Zulu cosmology. In line with the idea of the poet as an inspired prophet, the message of the speaking voice in the poem is indistinguishable from utterances of the immortal ancestors. Thus the bewildered speaker in the poem quizzically asks: 'Are these my words or yours , O deathless Muse?'. It is evident in this and other poems dealing with the theme of inspiration that Vilakazi's conception of the 'muse' combines both Western and African constitutive features. However in 'The Muse of Learning' '*Ithongo Lokwazi*' there is no doubt that Vilakazi is addressing a Zulu leader (Muse of Ndaba) who is presented as the custodian of the Zulu national heritage. It may seem paradoxical that Vilakazi seeks to preserve oral folklore and history kept in 'vessels' and 'calabashes' in the modern mode of writing. In the poem he makes an earnest appeal to the 'glorious Muse' who is knowledgeable in 'primal laws and ancient customs' to help him preserve this valuable knowledge in his creative writing:

Ngiphe, ungicaphunele namuhla
Kuleyo ndebe oyigcin' ethala lobuzwe,
Ikhono lokugcoba phansi lokhw' engikuzwayo,

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Ngibekel' izimfaba nezinkedama zikaNdaba.
Udum' akulwami, kodwa ngolwakho wedwa-
Laph' umuntw' ebeyini, angazith' udumo
Engaluphakelwa nguwe, kulawo magobongo
Nezimbiz' ezithule, zingakathintwa muntu?
Ngiyacela Thongo likaNdaba! (Ntuli 1993:75f).

Dear Muse! Impart to me today
Your knowledge of my people's heritage,
That I, endowed with power to record it,
May pass it on to Zulus yet unborn!
No fame I covet!—Glory is yours alone,
For what is Man that he should merit honour!
So let me drink this nectar from your vessels
And calabashes never impaired or tarnished!
O, hear me, I implore you, Muse of Ndaba! (Vilakazi 1973:34).

The Zulu writer and critic, D.B.Z.Ntuli (1984:99) argues that Vilakazi's conception of the muse is foreign to Zulu culture:

> Apart from acknowledging the help of the spirits of the known ancestors, Vilakazi believes that there is a special spirit responsible for giving inspiration to the artists. This concept is foreign to the Zulus. Vilakazi got it from Western poetry where we often find reference being made to the muses, the goddesses to which inspiration in various arts is attributed.

While I agree with Ntuli that the idea of the poetic muse is foreign to Zulu culture, I would argue that Vilakazi's presentation and interpretation of this concept in poems such as 'Power of Inspiration', 'Higher Education', '*UMamina*', 'The Poet', 'The Poet's Prayer' and 'The Muse of Learning', is largely underpinned by Zulu beliefs and traditions. For example, in 'The Poet' the speaker makes it abundantly clear that 'the muse' is one of the ancestral spirits. The Zulu phrase, '*Thongo likaMbongi*' is perhaps more emphatic in this regard as it is a direct reference to the poet as an ancestor *(ithongo)* than the rather vague English translation 'deathless muse'. Evidently Vilakazi is offering a culturally contextualised interpretation of the 'foreign' conception of the muse.

As noted earlier, the conception of the inspiring muse in Vilakazi's poetry assumes both African and Western features. For instance, in 'The Poet's Prayer' (*Umthandazo Wembongi*) Vilakazi the admirer of classical music, appeals to the 'hallowed Muse of Melody' which he believes inspired classical composers such as Schubert, Beethoven and Chopin to enkindle a similar creative fervour among his own people:

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Zingifak' umona,
Ngishishimezwe ubunjonjo.
We, maNyanda kaZulu!
Vusa nakithina,
Sizwe sikaSobantu,
Esiyimisebenzi yezandla zakho,
Izingcwet' eziphilel' inhlokomo
Yomphefumulo neminjunju yenyama:
Zibamb' iminyibe yezulu namafu,
NjengoShubeti noBithovini noPinsuti (Ntuli 1993:144).

O children of Zulus!
Those harmonies arouse my drowsing spirit
And stir my aspiration.
I pray you Lord, awake my own black people!-
Your children too, created in your image-
That they as well may voice the spirit's longings
And torments of the flesh;
That they as well may reach towards the heavens
No less than Schubert, Beethoven and Chopin (Vilakazi 1973:79).

In 'Umamina—an Ode to the Muse' a poem which shares some features in both its title and some aspects of content with Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself', the inspired and almost hallucinatory poet celebrates the mysterious power of the inspiring spirit who assumes various forms in the poem including that of an enchantingly beautiful yet elusive maiden. This poem which has been variously interpreted as a love poem, a nature poem, and as an elegy (Ntuli 1984:103), is essentially an ode in which the poet uses a love relationship as a metaphor to describe the creative process. The poem describes, in intensely metaphorical language, the operation of the poet's creative imagination. In analyzing this thematically complex poem we should be guided by its particularly suggestive title which implies that the poet is talking about his own inner sustaining spirit. Wainwright (1977:50) has referred to '*Mamina*' as 'the culmination of Vilakazi's search for inspiration'. In one important sense, therefore, '*Mamina*' represents Vilakazi's creative talent. As Cope (1984:17) has remarked:

> In '*UMamina*' ('the personification of the essence of myself') he finds his muse in the same way that a diviner finds inspiration and fulfilment through his (sic) ancestral spirit, after painful and perilous experiences.

The analogy implicit in Cope's comparison between the diviner and the poet seems to be a more accurate interpretation of Vilakazi's conception of inspiration and the role

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of the 'muse' than Ntuli's comment quoted above. It should be noted, however, that Cope is merely making a comparison and not offering any conclusive views about Vilakazi's self-conception as the mouthpiece of the ancestors. With unusual frankness, Cope (1984:17) admits that he cannot make any firm judgement on this issue because, as a critic, he finds it 'difficult to say how close Vilakazi could have been to traditional Zulu beliefs and responses, bearing in mind his Christian and academic background ...'. In other words what Cope is uncertain about here is the extent to which Vilakazi had been 'decultured' by the liberal-Christian ideology of the white missionaries and educators. The contention that Vilakazi's self-portrayal as the inspired interpreter of his people's collective experience suggests similarities with the functions of the *sangoma* has some validity. In '*UMamina*' Vilakazi consciously uses terminology and imagery associated with the art of divination to describe his own role as a 'poet-diviner'. Words such as 'bewildered', 'madness', 'rapture', 'obsession', 'spell' and 'possession' all suggest the intensity of the inspired poet's feelings. Like a diviner, the poet has been 'called' to perform a sacred duty. As Koopman (1980:17) elaborates:

> The *isangoma* is a social interpreter; he sees beneath the surface and reveals what is hidden. He is the interpreter of dreams, and therefore the link between the *abaphilayo* and the *abaphansi*, i.e. the living and those below. Vilakazi sees that the poet does something similar in that he puts the inchoate into words; that he puts into tangible form that which his audience only vaguely thinks or feels[11].

In terms of Goldmann's theory (1970:109f), Vilakazi as the poet-sangoma has access to the 'possible consciousness' of his social group which represents the most coherent formulation of the group's world-view:

> Great literary works ... originate from a certain social situation but, far from being the simple reflection of a collective consciousness, they are a particularly unified and coherent expression of the tendencies and aspirations of a given group. They express what the individual members of the group felt and thought without being conscious of it or without being able to formulate it so coherently. They are a meeting of the personal and the collective on the highest level of significant structuring.

Of all Vilakazi's poems '*UMamina*' is the poem which is closest both stylistically and thematically to the poetry of the British Romantic poets. In its use of natural imagery, its idealism, its focus on evanescent beauty and on the reciprocal relationship between

[11] For a discussion of the portrayal of diviners in Vilakazi's novels, see also Nyembezi's (1971) article 'The Use of Magic in Vilakazi's Novels'.

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the poet's creative imagination and external objects, it shares some features with Keats' odes and Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. Invoking the revolutionary creative force symbolised by the West wind, the speaker in Shelley's poem says:

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
>
> Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
> Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
> My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Like Shelley who willingly surrenders to the controlling force of the wind, Vilakazi speaks of the over-powering yet sustaining effect of his mysterious muse. As suggested in the stanzas quoted below Mamina is in control of the poet's total being. Like a possessed person, the poet has no option but to comply with Mamina's wishes:

> Yebo Mamina, sengiyavuma.
> Amathong' angethwes' umthwalo,
> Ngiwuzwa ngiphapheme nakwaButhongo.
> Ngithi ngizumekile ngixoxiswe ngawe,
> Ngivuke ngokhel' ubhaqa ngiqoshame,
> Ngiphenduke ngelul' isandla,
> Ngikulolong' emagxalabeni.
> Ngizw' ikhambi lingen'ekhanda,
> Lingiphethul' ingqondo ngibamb' usiba,
> Kanti sekuyilapho ngihay' inkondlo,
> Ngiyizw' idilik' emafini nasemhlabathini,
> Iqubuk' emzimbeni nasemkhathini womoya (Ntuli 1993:188f).
>
> Yes, Mamina, I accept
> The spirit's decree that I should bear this burden:
> This knowledge haunts me—wakeful or asleep.
> How often in my dreams I hear your voice,
> Then waking, light a torch, sit up in bed,
> And stretch my arms in longing to caress
> Your shoulders gleaming near me.
> Thus inspiration comes to me
> And fills my heart and mind:
> I seize my pen; a song is drifting earthwards—
> I hear it falling downward from the skies
> To take possession of my soul and voice (Vilakazi 1973:114-116).

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Perhaps the most remarkable similarity between the themes of '*UMamina*' and the concerns of the British Romantic poets is the speaker's preoccupation with the functioning of the creative imagination in Vilakazi's poem. As Frank Kermode et al. (1973:4) suggest, this was one of the defining features of romanticism:

> The major Romantic questers, whether we see these as the poets themselves or as the quasi-autobiographical heroes of their poems, are all engaged in the extraordinary enterprise of seeking to re-beget their own selves, as though through the imagination a man might hope to become his own father, or at least his own heroic precursor.

In '*UMamina*' the poet's desire to become part of the community of national poets is even more emphatically expressed than in 'Power of Inspiration'. As a result of the tireless efforts of the elusive and enchanting spiritual being known to Vilakazi as Mamina, the poet who apprehensively approached Shaka's palace at Dukuza now 'proudly sit[s] in council':

> Unginik' umgqik' ebandla,
> Ngazibuka ngiphakathi kwezimbongi,
> Izinxeleha zingengelez' ekhanda,
> Naphakathi kwamasok' angenakufa
> Ezizukulwaneni zezizukulwane.
> Ungenza ngilunywe ngamatekenya.
> Ngibhedle njalo ngingahlali ngithule (Ntuli 1993:186).

> Because of you, I proudly sit in council,
> Deeming myself as one among the poets
> Whose heads are crowned with laurel,
> Whose names will live forever on the lips
> Of each successive generation.
> Because of you my soul is in a ferment!
> Because of you I cannot be at peace! (Vilakazi 1973:113).

A careful reading of Vilakazi's poems dealing with theme of inspiration reveals that his understanding of the relationship between African/ Zulu and Western culture was far from simplistic but was largely characterised by a conscious desire to integrate the two world views into one coherent perspective. In his portrayal of the pre-colonial culture of his people Vilakazi does not adopt a dismissive stance often exhibited by the *kholwa* community of his time. The poems discussed above all suggest that Vilakazi saw his role as that of a 'cultural worker' or 'cultural activist' whose creative output had an important socio-historical dimension. In keeping with the view expressed in the poems discussed above, Vilakazi regards the ancestors of his nation as the

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mainspring of his creative talent. While his poetic vision could be said to be backward-looking to the often idealised traditional past, it is also forward-looking to the concessions, adaptations and accommodations that must occur on both sides in the encounter between Africa and the West. As Raymond Kunene (1962:213) puts it:

> Much as he mourns for the past he has realised that the past is not very important unless it has principles or ideas of present application.

It is also remarkable that Vilakazi as a 'modern' poet chooses to utilise the cultural heritage of his people to conceptualise and define his role. Like the poets associated with Black Consciousness philosophy in the 1970s, Vilakazi seems to have been aware of the crucial role played by the myths, rituals and symbols of the past in the creation of a new self-assertive political consciousness.

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