

# **'Here be Dragons': Challenging 'Liberal' Constructions of Protest Poetry**

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In addition to the apartheid State, the emergent culture of liberation had to contend with another hegemonic formation, comprising white English-speaking intellectuals who took an interest in South African literature. Liberals have been highly influential in the production and reception of literature in English, through university English departments, literary journals and literary magazines, publishing houses, the English Academy of South Africa, the Grahamstown Festival, the Market Theatre<sup>1</sup>, and most of the English press. Despite their influence, the liberals have been a small group. Estimating that liberals comprise some 5% of South Africa's population, Peter Horn (1994:11) argues that

a culture catering to less than five percent of the population of a nation is a limited culture and a limiting culture; it is time we saw through the proposition that culture is by nature only for the select few.

While Horn's conclusion is important, the size of the liberals is but a fraction of his estimate. Further, although there has been a tendency to refer to this group inclusively as liberals, it has ranged from what may be designated as conservative liberals to left liberals<sup>2</sup>. Although imprecise, the term 'conservative liberals' usefully denotes those

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<sup>1</sup> See Anne Fuchs' (1990:125f) critique of the role of the Market Theatre between 1976 and 1986.

<sup>2</sup> The Urban Foundation's statistics suggest that whites as a whole comprised a little over 5 million people, i.e., 12% of the population (*Race Relations Survey* 1993:255). During the 1987 white elections most English-speakers voted for the National Party, to the extent that the liberal Progressive Federal Party lost its position as official opposition to the Conservative Party. Some English-speakers have supported groups to the far right of the National Party. Finally, about half of Horn's figure seems to comprise children, who are not usually included in such a count. Lodge (1978:109) refers to Martin Legassick's distinction between 'white groups primarily concerned with the saving of what they believed to be existing democratic values and the nationalist concern with the overall transformation of white fascist domination into democracy'.

who sought to characterise themselves as liberal but who were also concerned with maintaining their privileged position in the existing structure of power:

Sociologists who have studied the white community of the sixties conclude that, on the whole, one is dealing with a conservative majority, and this includes the English-speaking South Africans whose liberal tradition has been greatly exaggerated. Although there is no aggressive racialism among many of them, prejudices and stereotyped attitudes towards the black community .... abound (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984:24).

This group is central to understanding the hesitations, silences, gaps and misrepresentation in the literary discourse that deals with the development of resistance literature. In a country moving towards civil war in which literature offered people resisting the State a forum, conservative liberals were part of the institutional forces that have sought to neutralise resistance writers. This had the effect of naturalising economic and political domination behind prescriptions of taste, despite the fact that, as Nadine Gordimer (1988a:228) has pointed out, 'the white middle-class establishment was not, as it claimed, the paradigm of South African life, and white culture was not the definitive South African culture'. Central to the existence of the minority interest group has been its ability to impose

its preoccupations and problems, its particular solutions and its vision of the world on all other sectors .... to prescribe the conceptual and real universe according to its own law (Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:17)<sup>3</sup>.

Although there were lively and varied experiments in poetry and other genres (notably drama and music) in the 1970s and 1980s, there were very few attempts to develop a sense of what these expressions might mean, particularly in relation to the socio-political contestation and transformation that was underway. Significantly, the revision of liberal South African historiography that had been undertaken by writers such as Johnstone, Wolpe, Trapido and Legassick in the early 1970s seemed to have bypassed literary studies. Writers kept claiming that they were apolitical in a highly politicised society, as is evident in the articles of Douglas Livingstone (1974; 1976). As the State policed cultural production, conservative liberal intellectuals believed that they operated 'in abstraction from the institutional sites in which the complex relations of discourse and power are actually negotiated' (Pechey 1989:52).

I will argue that the ideological position of the conservative liberals clarifies the dilemma of some settler cultures: never substantive and too remote from the European centre, they compensated for their marginality by asserting their power in the

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<sup>3</sup> For Kelwyn Sole (1990:61) '[t]hey have a power of exclusion far in excess, it seems to me, of their powers of discrimination'. I would add that the ideological production of conservative liberals is 'complicit with Western international economic interests .... to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject' (Spivak 1988:271).

ex-colony as neo-colonial guardians of access to the centre of cultural life. In particular A.G. Ulliyatt and Stephen Watson have clearly shown their presumption of themselves as part of the principal interpretive community. This bears similarities to the widespread assumption among intellectuals of themselves as the natural audience of literature, as exemplified by Stanley Fish's (1980) 'interpretive community'. Such a position is produced through the tactical delimitation of the noun 'community' so as to enable one group, in Bourdieu's terms, to impose the norms of their own perception, i.e. to be perceived as they perceive themselves (see Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:19). In this way, questions regarding the source of interpretive authority are circumvented, and authority devolves as if by default upon a tiny intellectual coterie which constitutes itself as universal, transparent and ahistorical, but which has tended to be white, male, middle-class and Anglocentric. The presumption of a fairly homogeneous audience represents a tactical disregard of the deep divisions in South African society.

### 'protest literature'

All critics declare not only their judgement of work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art (Bourdieu 1993:35).

Using English offered black resistance writers a better chance of being published. This was partly the result of the State's control, division and underdevelopment of the indigenous languages. There was scarcely any structural support for the development of a literary culture in any of the indigenous languages. Further, given the State's patronage of publishing monopolies that adhered to its line, there was no space for independent publishers and other structures of production<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the hegemonic power of the English language which made many black writers feel obliged to write in English (their second or third language), there were strategic reasons. Writers judged that publishing in English rendered their work less susceptible to State interference, while it increased their access to a broader community of South Africans resisting apartheid and to people located beyond the borders who read English. They took their decision in a context inhospitable to their artistic and political aims.

Some of those in charge of English language publication and validation used State repression, either consciously or unconsciously, to advance their power and interests. To maintain their cultural dominance they tried to absorb and deflect the challenge of resistance writing. Ulliyatt's article 'Dilemmas in Black Poetry' (1977) is a

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<sup>4</sup> The sole publisher in Zulu declined to publish Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*, which necessitated his having to translate it into English and publish it overseas, by which time he had decided to go into exile.

blatant attempt to maintain cultural dominance by containing, marginalising or excluding resistance literature. Ulliyatt employs a host of value-laden terms like 'intrinsic poetic merits', 'authenticity' and 'tradition' while ignoring the effects of the State's repression on black writers and writing. Ulliyatt was challenged by Slabbert (1978), Sole (1978) and Maughan-Brown (1979). Less extreme, though still Eurocentric (and more influential than Ulliyatt's article), are the approaches of the editors of various poetry anthologies<sup>5</sup>. For instance, in their introduction to *Voices of the Land: An Anthology of South African Poems* the editors, Marcia Leveson and Jonathan Paton (1985:7), make the following assertion:

Our intention is to give the reader a sense of the development of South African poetry since its beginnings with Thomas Pringle in the early nineteenth century.

Leveson and Paton's identification of South African poetry with white English South African poetry is significant<sup>6</sup>. Their comments indicate the lag between the phenomenon of resistance poetry in English (which had appeared for more than a generation) and its reception by cultural arbiters. Another example that suggests an unconscious Anglocentrism occurs in a press interview with the winner of the Sanlam Literary Award in 1987, Professor Michael Chapman. Discussing the struggles of creative writers to deal with social reality, he remarked:

Poetry in South Africa is not a precious retreat. Since the 1820s it has engaged itself with social problems (in MacGregor 1987:11).

Both sets of statements clarify the exclusions on which conservative liberal discourse was founded. Many South African resistance poems of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s show the influence of indigenous oral traditions that predate Pringle and British settlement in this region. The omission of indigenous literary/cultural traditions from

<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s it was surprising if black writers were included at all: *South African Writing Today*, edited by Nadine Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams (1967) is more representative of South African writing than *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (1968) edited by Jack Cope and Uys Krige. The latter included English translations of poets writing in Afrikaans and African languages, although no African writers who wrote in English were included (See Alvarez-Pereyre 1984f:22).

<sup>6</sup> Leveson and Paton's remarks have a curious parallel in the rhetoric of the State in the 'era of reform': the Botha government's claim that South Africans rejected sanctions was accepted without question in most public forums (and by the liberal media), the tacit assumption being that the term 'South Africans' meant white South Africans. By contrast, Mark Orkin's (1986) research into attitudes towards sanctions demonstrated that most black South Africans favoured the imposition of sanctions, and were prepared to endure short-term hardship to be rid of the minority regime.

Chapman's construction is particularly surprising given the Chapman and Dangor anthology (1982), which has 'San' and 'Khoi-Khoi' material, and Chapman's extensive representation of black poets in a series of anthologies. This seems to suggest the extent to which ideology overrides data'. This type of contradiction may be traced, as Amílcar Cabral has suggested, to colonial constructions of history:

The colonialists have a habit of telling us that when they arrived in Africa they put us into history. You are well aware that it's the contrary—when they arrived they took us out of our own history (quoted in Brett 1986:83).

A further problem with this mode of representation is encapsulated in Chapman's shorthand use of the term 'Soweto Poets' (e.g. in his 1982 collection *Soweto Poetry*) to refer to poets such as Serote, Gwala, Sepamla and Mtshali, when only one of them, Sepamla, actually lived in Soweto for a time. Mafika Gwala (1989:70), the poet-activist from Mpumalanga (KwaZulu-Natal), challenged the reductive and inaccurate use of the internationally-recognisable name:

I refuse to be called a 'Soweto Poet'. We have all disagreed with the labelling ... a good example of liberal patronizing. I just cannot consider myself in the mould of a 'Soweto Poet'. Living with constant fear and bitter anger in this country does not revolve around Soweto alone.

Like Chapman, Leveson and Paton's group interest seems to prevent them from accounting for the impact of other cultural traditions in their construction of the development of South African poetry. The statements of Leveson and Paton (1985:7) and Chapman (in MacGregor 1987:11) suggest that they could only imagine their readership to be conservative liberal white English-speaking South Africans like themselves. Ulliyatt's mystification of the continent is part of an approach that chooses to ignore the material conditions that inform black culture and literature, and is epitomised by Douglas Livingstone's (1978:10-15) well-known poem 'August Zulu'. Responding to Ulliyatt's (1978:53f) invocation of the 'perennial problem ... of whether politics and poetry can mix', Jos Slabbert (1978:86) counters that such a question is foreclosed, it 'doesn't exist in a country where going to the toilet is political'.

Gwala's objection to the label 'Soweto Poet' has a parallel in Njabulo Ndebele's opposition to the title of the anthology of black poetry, *Ask Any Black Man*, that was edited by Tim Couzens and Essop Patel and published by the progressive publishing house, Ravan Press. Ndebele's (1983:45) stated objections had to do with the implication in the title that the collection comprised 'protest poetry':

None of my poems have been written for people who wanted to hear me

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Chapman (1988) has attempted to shift from this position.

complain. They have been written in order to share serious insights, to share perceptions, and to *alter* perceptions in a most profound manner<sup>2</sup>.

Ndebele treats literature as an activist, and he does not share the conception of protest literature as a safety valve in an oppressive society. There have been differing views regarding the meaning of the term 'protest literature' and the period in which it occurred. Richard Rive (1983:26) offers a sense of the construct:

protest literature [addresses] the discrimination implicit in black-white relationships, and ... is critical of white, racial domination. Its literature is produced by black unenfranchised non-citizens for whites who have the vote and so can effect change<sup>3</sup>.

Some activist-writers, like Dennis Brutus, described themselves as protest writers in the 1960s (see Owomoyela 1993:131). So did the poet and critic, Cosmo Pieterse (1969), who used the term in the period before the rise of Black Consciousness. Brutus and Pieterse's sense of the term (particularly given Brutus' sports activism) was quite remote from the diluted meaning the term acquired in conservative liberal discourse (which Rive's analysis reproduces). Given the bannings, house arrests and exit permits to which resistance writers like Brutus and Alex la Guma were subject, sympathetic foreign audiences were often all they could anticipate in the short and medium term. The combination of the political repression and liberal cultural hegemony may have led some of the next wave of resistance writers to appeal to sympathetic and influential local or foreign audiences in some of their work. It is possible, for example, to read Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's 'The Master of the House' (1972:55) and Motshile wa Nthodi's 'South African Dialogue' (in Chapman & Dangor 1982:95f) as protest that appealed to the sympathetic fractions of the ruling class (the liberals) for relief. Owomoyela (1993:131) has suggested that:

Protest poetry may be thought of as a black expression of liberalism—a poetry of personal response to oppression based on assumptions of justice, rights, and human dignity.

However, even the more liberal black critics and writers like Richard Rive (1983:29) were wary of a literary category that traded in stereotypes and simplifications:

Writing is at white heat and in exclamation marks so that the final product is

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<sup>2</sup> In 1982 Ravan Press responded by changing the title of the collection to *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891 - 1981*, the first part of which was taken from Daniel Kunene's poem in the collection.

<sup>3</sup> The conservative liberal sense of the term 'protest' appears to have its roots in Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter's (1977) work *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882 - 1964*.

often crude, ill-constructed and stylistically weak.

Rive (1983:22) also pointed out that 'almost all contemporary writers do not fit comfortably' into the category of protest literature. According to Gareth Cornwell (1980:58), Rive described protest literature as 'writing produced by blacks for white consumption'. Cornwell (1980:58) clarified Rive's position with the argument that:

It was essentially negative writing geared as it was to invoking a sympathetic attitude from a more fortunate readership.

The difference between Rive's position as a liberal black critic and the position of liberal white critics is significant (and will be examined later).

In exile, critics to the left of Rive, such as Njabulo Ndebele and Mbulelo Mzamane, registered greater problems with the construct of protest literature. Ndebele (1991:46) addressed some of the problems of the category in different articles, raising questions such as 'Why the misnomer "protest"?', and declaring that 'what has been called protest literature has run its course in South Africa' (Ndebele 1988:205). Mzamane (1991:60) also expressed serious reservations:

Now more than ever, it has become reductionist to categorise all African literature as protest. Protest literature is writing by the racially oppressed addressed to readers from the ruling class in an attempt to solicit their sympathy and support against discriminatory laws and practices .... Protest springs from a feeling of being a ward: it is the activity of apprentices, and it is the action of subordinates who see themselves as such. It is both solicitous and moderate. It functions within the system, often with regard to due process, prescribed channels of communication, and respect for law and order. The end in view of protest is reform, never revolution. Protest is a quest for accommodation, and not a struggle for empowerment.

The term 'protest' has quite a different meaning in conservative liberal discourse to the construct in resistance discourse, as Mzamane begins to suggest in his subsequent references to the Karis and Carter (1991:60f) text. At the same time Mzamane's unwitting conflation of the two meanings under the conservative liberal rubric attests to its hegemonic power, a power that is part of a neo-colonial process of alienating the production of emerging writers from the cultural production of the oppressed majority. It is silent about the history of protest action, mass political mobilization and national resistance that characterised political behaviour over many decades (such as the Defiance campaigns, the Sharpeville demonstration and the Soweto uprising). Instead, the term carries the implication that resistance writers could only imagine dealing with oppression through a beseeching and individualised literature of complaint, which suggests that Wally Serote was justified in his concerns that:

The oppressor's very concept of culture, rather than leading people to deal with their own realities, serves to confuse and distract (quoted by Watts 1989:252).

## constructing an audience

They want anger to be buried  
in the carved tomb of verse  
(Evans in Feinberg 1980:20f)

It is possible that some resistance writers may have written for a liberal white audience for reasons that have to do with power and access: the effects of liberal hegemony, which suggested the naturalness of such a readership; a belief that this was the route to universal reception; the pressure upon emerging writers in a highly stratified society to accept a marginal identity in the cultural spaces of a dominant group; a desperation to be published; or a belief that little else was possible, given the level of political repression. However, most resistance writers' struggles for equality tended to inform their relationships with all their audiences, ruling out the obsequious literature of complaint that came parcelled with the liberal appellation. Ndebele's (1983:44f) objection to the title *Ask Any Black Man* challenges the hegemonic assumptions regarding the audience of protest literature. While such a title directs the anthology of (mainly) resistance poems towards liberal whites (implicit in the power-laden issue of *who* does the asking), it reinforces the conservative liberals' position that 'protest literature' was directed primarily towards themselves. Ndebele's (1991:45) continuing disquiet over these constructions of audience is evident in his assessment, years later, that '[t]he question of the audience for this "protest literature" is a problematic one'.

Many resistance poets had complex notions of their intended audiences. The radical writer James Matthews treated his different audiences in quite distinct ways:

*Cry Rage!* is manifestly intended for two kinds of reader, by definition very different from each other: to his white readers, Matthews shouts his disgust and warns of the approaching 'day of anger', while he tries to open the eyes of his black readers to their subjection and to instill in them courage and pride (quoted by Alvarez-Percyre 1984:20).

Owing to the structural violence of apartheid (which had consequences for education, language policies, library facilities and the identity of the book-buying public<sup>10</sup>), the construction of emerging readers was largely an act of faith on the part of the writers, who anticipated and fostered their development. By inserting themselves as the principal audience these liberals further marginalised or negated people who had been

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<sup>10</sup> In South Africa the differences between the implied/intended reader and the actual reader are typically polarised. The publisher Adriaan Donker (1998) believes that white English-speaking liberals were the main buyers of the anthologies of the resistance poets he published in the 1970s. Donker has reason to believe that a significant number of black township youth heard the poetry of the resistance poets, and he feels there is a connection between the resistance poetry and the June 1976 uprising.



systematically excluded by the apartheid dispensation. By diminishing the complex range of readers assumed by resistance writers (including the sympathetic audiences that were developing overseas), and presenting themselves as the sole or most significant audience, the conservative liberals tried to increase their control over the reception of the literature. Ndebele (1991:45) raises the implicit contradiction in such a position:

Such factors as the levels of literacy in English among the African population would *objectively* point towards a particular audience: an English-speaking liberal one at that. But that audience, schooled under a Eurocentric literary tradition, was in turn, schooled to reject this literature 'meant' for them.

From the late-1960s most activist-writers (like Matthews) responded by focusing their attacks not just on the State but on conservative liberal attempts at containing resistance literature. Black Consciousness writers, in particular, challenged the self-serving parameters that legitimated a familiar authoritative interpretive community. Ndebele (1991:45) comments sceptically that:

Conventional wisdom proclaims that [protest] literature was premised on its supposed appeal to the conscience of the white oppressor.

Through the construct of protest literature liberal intellectuals installed themselves as the intended audience of resistance writers with the suggestion that as a sympathetic portion of the ruling bloc they would intercede on behalf of the oppressed. This manoeuvre is captured in Anne McClintock's (1987:229) description of them as

tactful squadrons of moral teachers, advisors, and bewildered [who] coax those who are ruled into admitting the legitimacy and 'universality' of the ruler's values".

However, there was great silence about their attendant responsibilities; all that was evident was the presence of a fastidious audience. The strategy served to strengthen the legitimacy of the conservative liberal hegemony, while freeing the supposed intercessories from action and accountability. That Ndebele (1991:45) has been alert to the contradiction is evident in his persistent question:

But what of the audience for whom this literature was not 'objectively' meant? What about the *effective* audience?

This is the key issue. Although it is not addressed directly in the essay in which it is

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" They responded to political and economic crisis by railing against the 'sacrifice of the intrinsic rules of the craft for political ends, formal ineptitude, loss of individual expression and originality' (McClintock 1987:247f).

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raised, the title of the essay, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary', offers direction.

The hegemony of defensive publishers, editors and critics hampered resistance writers, and an early challenge to their influence came from David Evans. Evans had been imprisoned for five years for sabotage in the 1960s (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984:85). Writing in exile after his release Evans challenged prescriptions about the role of the poet in a police State. In the poem 'If Poets Must Have Flags' Evans suggests that critics chose the desocialized, ahistorical Formalist and New Critical interpretive procedures because of their own historical crisis of location:

They  
ask the poet to be  
a songbird in a cage (in Feinberg 1980:20f)

The conclusion contains an engaged and defiant manifesto. Attacking petty bourgeois sensibilities, Evans rejects the liberalist ideological ruse that dealt with its political marginality by asserting its cultural significance:

We refuse  
  
We'll go ugly and free  
exhuming the corpses  
releasing the rot  
revealing the holes ripped by the shot.  
We'll wrap around our banners  
the guts of the dead  
- if we must have flags  
let them always be red (in Feinberg 1980:20f)

During the late 1960s and early 1970s a strong contingent of black poets emerged (in literary magazines like *The Classic*), and in 1971 Lionel Abrahams published an anthology of Oswald Mtshali's poems *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*<sup>12</sup>, which initiated debate on the value of black poetry. Liberal intellectuals responded with reviews, debates, articles and conferences; while reservations were expressed by writers like Serote, Ndebele and Rive, who were preoccupied with the actions of the State. These writers, like Matthews and Gwala, rejected the official version of 'protest literature', which they saw as an ideological category that did violence to their work. Rejecting any control over the production of resistance writing, James Matthews created a company called Blac Publishing House in his home township of Athlone on the Cape Flats. Incensed by the attempts to patrol poetic discourse Matthews (1984:74) rejected the title of poet, declaring 'I am not a poet'. He explained his position as

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<sup>12</sup> Through Abrahams' involvement in literary societies such as PEN (1988:286-304) and through his work as an editor he supported emerging writers. The first collections of Mtshali and Serote were published with his support.

follows:

1972 became too much for me. The Dimbazas, Ilings, Sadas and Limehills. Dying children—starvation, their sickness. I could write but I was not doing anything about the situation. I felt physically ill. I wrote. It was not prose. Critics hyena-howled. It was not poetry. I never said it was. I write expressions of feelings (Matthews 1984:74).

Backed into a false dichotomy by the critics' prioritisation of art over politics, Matthews insisted that the form his writings took was less important than their substance. Peter Horn (1994:13) records Matthews' reaction to the term 'Poetry?': 'Bullshit!'. Gareth Cornwell (1980:67f) pointed out that to

judge Matthews' work in terms of an 'aesthetic ideology' which he has deliberately jettisoned is inappropriate .... For Matthews it is clear that the message is indeed more important than art.

A later anthology by Matthews, *Poisoned Wells and Other Delights* (1990), is pointedly subtitled 'a collection of feelings'. Matthews echoes the dilemma that Ntombiyakhe Kabiyele Kaxhoka (1979:61) expressed a decade earlier in 'When last did I have a good laugh?':

These are no poems crooning  
Sweet nothings  
These are my feelings

Mafika Gwala (1984:43) also challenged the 'academics who claim an almost sacerdotal authority over black writing', demanding:

what moral right does the academic have to judge my style of writing? What guidelines outside the culture of domination has he applied? (Gwala 1984:48).

This moral right was simply assumed by some critics who reproduced the restless and alienated character of western poets and other artists as being natural and archetypal. By fetishising literature they attempted to avoid the insistent social and political issues. This is evident in the critical work of the most prominent representatives of this tradition in the period under survey, Lionel Abrahams and Stephen Watson. As Abrahams' work has received much attention<sup>13</sup>, the focus will be on Stephen Watson

<sup>13</sup> Kelwyn Sole's (1988) review of a selection of Abraham's work is particularly incisive. It follows Mike Kirkwood's (1976) analysis of Guy Butler's work, in 'The Colonizer: A Critique of the English South African Culture Theory'.

who, in the mid-to-late 1980s, exemplified the dominant liberal position on South African poetry.

### **'the best writers in this country'**

It [poetry] is the loneliest of arts, the one which in this century can fittingly be called the widow and widower of all the arts, the one most neglected, most bereaved, most impotent (Watson 1990:15).

As with other writers like Guy Butler and Douglas Livingstone, Watson's problem is located in his own marginality, which he projects as a universal characteristic<sup>14</sup>. Ahead of Watson, Ulliyatt (1977:58) tried to 'balance' his disapproval of some poems read in October 1976 at the ninetieth anniversary of Johannesburg ('a singularly inappropriate occasion to attack any law') by arguing that:

black poets have been succumbing regularly to debilitating effects of resentment, and that has blinded them to the creative potential of a healthy rebellion.

Ulliyatt and others tried to sustain their power and values through offering guidance to the resistance writers who wrote in their medium. In his 1985 essay about the role of poetry in society Watson (1990:19) writes in favour of 'an inherently conservative function' of poetry as 'one kind of check in a larger system of imbalances ... which seems sadly neglected these days'. Yet, the deployment of poetry by writers like Chris van Wyk and Dikobe wa Mogale as a 'check in a larger system of imbalances' (such as apartheid and capitalism) is deprecated by Watson. However, Watson's position must be read against the socially committed work that appeared in spite of the oppression of the 1970s and 1980s.

Less privileged South African writers were dealing with the decimation of fellow artists and comrades. Chris van Wyk's poem 'We can't meet here, brother: for Thami Mnyele' (1978:34) was written after the artist and activist Thami Mnyele was killed in an SADF raid on Botswana on 14 June 1985, in which twelve people, including a Batswana child, were slaughtered. The poem is not so much a critique of the State (which may be assumed), instead Van Wyk focuses on the distraction caused by the powerful and self-serving press and intellectuals. Masquerading as universal concerns, their narrow interests threatened to drown out the precarious communication networks between oppressed people:

I can't hear you brother!

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<sup>14</sup> 'Most white english poets', McClintock (1987:237-238) argues, 'comforted themselves ... that the lonely poetic voice was also the eloquent mouthpiece of universal truth'.

for the noise of the theorists  
and the clanging machinery of the liberal Press (Van Wyk 1978:34).

In sharp contrast to Watson's position, Mthobhi Mutlootse, writing at around the same time, clarifies the continuing emphasis by black writers on socio-political issues:

the mood in black literature can never be otherwise but challenging, in that the whole situation is still the same as the one that prevailed with the previous generation of writers, in that we are still disenfranchised, we have no vote, we have no land, and—if anything—things are getting worse economically and otherwise (in Welz 1987:47).

In a period of enormous social division, inequity and conflict, Watson's 1987 essay 'Shock of the Old: What's Become of "Black" Poetry' (1990) crudely affirms the privileged minority to which he belongs:

One simply has to remember who are the best writers in this country. Without exception they are those who have been most aware of other world literatures and traditions elsewhere (Watson 1990:84).

Watson responds to his own cultural and political alienation from the majority of South Africans by focusing defensively on what he calls 'world literatures'<sup>15</sup>. The most common complaint against resistance writers concerned the 'overly political' nature of their products, as in Watson's (1990:91) argument that South African poetry has suffered 'under the internal siege of its own political obsessions'. By negating the historical, political, legal, economic and social imperatives that inform oppressed lives, conservative liberal critics failed to recognise that black poets were responding to the exigencies of their material conditions, and that they adapted English to address the predicament.

Implicit in Watson's statements regarding 'the best writers in this country' is reference to the debate on standards in South African literature, which intensified as black students who had gone through Bantu education began to enter the tertiary institutions set aside for racial minorities. In such a context the invocation of 'the best writers' is not simply an aesthetic claim devoid of articulated criteria; rather it is connected to an institutional discourse mobilising pre-emptive mechanisms of exclusion in defence of minority privileges<sup>16</sup>. Watson ignores the fact that aesthetic

<sup>15</sup> This more circumspect formulation is in response to previous challenges, such as Cronin's (1983:58) exhortation that South Africans need to 'learn how to speak' to and of themselves, and the postcolonial challenge that the term 'universal' has served as a synonym for the West.

<sup>16</sup> Such developments are not new, as Carey (1992) suggests. As oppressed people in societies like Britain won access to education, the elites developed a discourse of standards and excellence to check their advancement. Herbert Vilakazi and Bothale Tema point out that merit is usually concern over power, material and emotional security, and the desire to perpetuate monopoly over these positions for the current incumbents and their kind, be it based on class, race, sex, religion (in Jansen 1991:135).

value is socially constructed and dependent upon complex social and institutional circumstances, and tends to valorise the special knowledge of elite groups. Ulliyatt (1977:51-62) did much the same in 'Dilemmas in Black Poetry', assuming, as Sole (1978:92) charges, that 'European literary norms are necessarily at a higher stage of development than African writing'.

Towards the end of his 1989 essay 'Under Pressure: Poetry in South Africa Today', Watson (1990:86) challenges unnamed Marxist literary critics over their sense that the literature that was coming out of the townships was significant:

It fitted many people's sense of historical symmetry to believe that, since the townships were the crucible of resistance to the South African state, it was there too that the most responsive art should emerge. It made sense, too, to believe that just as one class was challenging another one, so one literature in this country would gain ascendancy over the other, culturally dominant one. In short, it had all the force of a certain historical logic to believe that 'white' poetry was being and would be supplanted by 'black'.

Watson's comment reveals the fears that drove the neocolonial coterie to undermine the work being produced. Ndebele (1992:24) has examined the effects of an uncritical membership of a privileged group in a divided South Africa:

it sent them to well equipped schools; it provided them with publishing opportunities; it sanctified their language through legislation and language academies; it gave them theatres, museums, art galleries, concert halls, and libraries; it arranged for them special salary scales that ensured access to a range of cultural facilities as well as the ability to buy books and newspapers; it created literary awards to honour them; it also made possible for some of them to become critics and reviewers who influenced literary taste and declared literary standards ... it gave them passports to travel ... it sought to make them take for granted the elevated status of their citizenship.

Watson's proprietorial attempts to control discursive space closely resembles the invective of reactionary minorities who believed that their privileges were unfairly threatened by the impending socio-political shifts. Born just after the Bantu Education Act (1953) took effect on the education of his black contemporaries, Watson (1990:85) demonstrates little grasp of its impact:

the still-born character of much 'black' poetry cannot be attributed solely to its stupefying intellectual poverty. It has been ill-served by its critics .... no one seemed prepared to call the rank bad rank bad, the banal banalizing, the cliché a cliché (and bad because it is, in language, the supreme form of indifference to the terrible individuality of other people's suffering).

While it may be true that some literary efforts were published before they were ready, that is an issue of the development of a writing culture in any society. Constructive ways of dealing with the problems were addressed by the writers' workshops held by township cultural groups, the African Writers' Association and the Congress of South

African Writers. However, Watson seems to think that the role of the critic is merely to conduct postmortems on texts; his critical work shows little understanding of the possibility of making a constructive contribution to the development of literature in a society in transition<sup>17</sup>.

As the political situation became more polarised, foreign powers (such as the Bush administration in the United States) joined in the criticism against the apartheid government. An unexpected outcome of elite access to foreign audiences was that those who found it difficult to subscribe to the emerging democratic process in South Africa were obliged to reconsider the terms of their engagement, lest they be seen as reactionary. This is apparent in the contradictory views expressed by Watson towards Chris van Wyk's poetry in two articles on 'politically-engaged' South African poetry that appeared two years apart. The essay 'Shock of the Old' appeared in the conservative liberal journal *Upstream*<sup>18</sup> in 1987, and refers to Chris van Wyk, Donald Parenzee and Dikobe wa Mogale in negative terms:

Formally, they add very little. The curious lack of linguistic energy in much of their work can hardly be said to be counteracted by the supposed ideological progression often claimed for it (Watson 1990:83).

In his aptly-titled 1989 *World Literature Today* article, 'Under Pressure', Watson (1990:94) writes of a 'remarkable satiric poem, "In Detention"' which, he claims, is 'part of this newfound depth' in South African poetry. However, the fact that Chris van Wyk had published the poem in his 1979 anthology *It is Time to go Home* (besides prior airings in magazines, readings and mass-meetings), i.e. at least a full decade earlier, renders Watson's argument absurd. Further, Van Wyk's collection appeared eight years before Watson's derogatory earlier (1987) remarks. The change is therefore not in Van Wyk's work but in Watson's evaluation as part of a strategy to maintain credibility. 'Under Pressure' registers the shift Watson felt obliged to make in his judgement of local poetry as the balance of political forces began to change and his position became exposed.

## writing back

in a society dominated by exploiting classes, the latter seek to concentrate the production of cultural models to the level of intellectual elites and force the people into the situation of being simple culture consumers .... Beneath each

<sup>17</sup> Despite his valorisation of Guy Butler in his introduction to *Guy Butler: Essays and Lectures 1949-91* (1994), Watson's own work shows no advance on the pioneering attempts of Butler to promote the study of South African literature.

<sup>18</sup> See Oliphant's analysis of *Upstream* in Petersen and Rutherford (1991:92-95).

apparently well-intentioned argument of imperialism, like the universality of culture, hides in reality, the idea that only Western culture is universal, a racist idea, which until very recently, was openly proclaimed (Samora Machel in Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:25)<sup>19</sup>.

It is significant that the construct of 'protest literature' yields more about its purveyors than its supposed subject, resistance writing, even as it burnishes the history, ideological orientation and political power of the hegemonic liberals. Peter Horn's (1974:18) early work, 'Poems at bargain prices', may be read as a cynical reaction to such self-aggrandisement. Horn, who worked within close proximity of various conservative liberal circles, expressed his exasperation at the mediating role of the literary establishment:

in purple shirt and orange tie  
I the accredited clown  
to this ailing society  
am allowed to tell you a few truths  
and similar nonsense

so listen you christened dung-heaps!  
I will lie for you  
everything: I can invent: everything ...  
looking at you I realise: I bottle of beer  
is better than I volume of poetry  
of any FORM and CONTENT poet

looking at you I realise: the only  
adequate criticism  
of this society  
would be  
TO BASH IN YOUR HEADS (Horn 1991:27f)

Horn exposes the economic underpinnings to the avowals of the high culture purveyors, illustrating Bourdieu's (1977:183) argument that 'all practices, including those purporting to be disinterested' can be treated as 'economic practices directed towards the maximising of material or symbolic profit'. Literature is an arena in which symbolic but no less serious struggles over resources, access and authority occur:

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<sup>19</sup> For theoretical elucidations of this social criticism see Bourdieu (1993:120), and Fiske (1992:154). 'The institutionalization of an imperialist discursive form under the guise of a neutral (objective, truth-serving, self-evident, ideologically disinterested) rationality is the source of the current cultural-social power in the South African academy. The situational, historical and ideological basis of the controlling voices in literary studies is effectively concealed' (Ryan 1990:4). See also Spivak (1990:1-16) on 'universal intellectuals'.



Poems? You want poems? We got poems!

Poems to make you dream  
while the rulers of the country are busy.  
Poems to send you to sleep  
While they test their tanks and guns.

We got poems.

Poems for you and your aftermeal sleep.  
Poems which do not disturb you nor  
The quiet of a Sunday afternoon.  
When the sermon in the morning was comforting  
And the chicken at lunch was tasty.

We got poems.

Horn's response to the cultural struggles of the 1980s was to challenge defensive liberal objections to thorough-going social transformation<sup>20</sup>. In 'The seventh elegy' Horn (1991:94f) urges his readers to ignore the polemics of the disinherited beneficiaries of apartheid. The poet understands his audience ('we') to be comrades who resist the oppressive system:

There will be those who only see the ruins: the  
    shortsighted  
vision of the disinherited of the revolution will  
    be with us  
for some time. They, who no longer own the riches  
    of the previous times  
nor yet the riches of the rising time:  
but let us not be confused by them.

While critics like Watson have focused narrowly and normatively on issues such as the quality of expression, the challenge for most committed writers and critics was to begin to construct a radical discursive space against, and despite, the repression of the State and the opportunism of more privileged peers.

Watson concludes the 'Under Pressure' essay with a defensive attempt to prop up his elitist assertions of value by referring to the supportive remarks of his students, some of whom, he suggests, may have been black. Even if race were not an issue, the

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<sup>20</sup> Like Horn, other progressive white writers such as Jeremy Cronin and Kelwyn Sole have also addressed 'the reality behind the mask: behind the real prosperity of a part of the population, and behind the general complacency, one discovers a world typified by guilt and schizophrenia, a world from which one's fellow men [sic]—those "unlike likes"—have been banished' (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984:251f).

unequal nature of academic-student relations raises the spectre of the 'Native Informant'<sup>21</sup>. The overworked, racist construct of the 'Native Informant' has long been pilloried by Wally Serote (1972:9) in 'The Actual Dialogue', and by Watson's colleague Peter Horn (1991:75). While Horn's title 'A Vehement Expostulation' parodies upper class English histrionics, Horn's speaker represents a caricature designed to challenge the hypocritical demands conservative liberals make of their 'Native Informants' by way of securing their material, social and psychic comfort:

This Meddem, is the situation as I see it:  
We live in a black-out. I can't paint it white  
with words. But for ready cash there are dominees

[...]

So what do you expect, Meddem? That I write  
soothing verse  
to send a few million trusting souls to sleep?  
Do you imply that I don't do my duty,  
if I am desperate? Or that I should write about  
daisies?

Or do you, Meddem, under these circumstances,  
expect me  
to write well balanced, polished verse? About what?  
Armies? Revolutions? Bloodshed? Apartheid?  
Or a hilarious sonnet about our impending peace?

Praise be the absent Lord! You never know,  
one day I might become responsible and write  
some exquisite and contrived poem  
about my complicated soul (Horn 1991:75)<sup>22</sup>.

In contrast to the fears of conservative liberal critics like Watson, Kelwyn Sole (1990:62) takes a more open and constructive approach consistent with democratic process, where standards evolve through contestation. In a talk given to the English Academy of South Africa in 1986 Njabulo Ndebele (1991:101) characterised the chauvinism that drove its members to try to expand the influence of the language while retaining control over it as the 'art of giving away the bride while insisting that she still belongs to you'. Ndebele was responding in particular to Butler's (1985) essay 'English and the English in the new South Africa'. The writer and anthologist Mthobi Mtshali (1980:5) was equally assertive in his refusal to entertain liberal prescriptions

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<sup>21</sup> See Spivak (1990:66). Watson's ventriloquism further confirms the accuracy of Spivak's (1987:107) and Trinh Minh-ha's (1989:67) portrayals of the cynical ways in which intellectual discourse can be used to commandeer oppressed people.

<sup>22</sup> Horn first published the poem in his 1979 anthology *Silence in Jail*.

based on Western bourgeois notions of artistic form:

We are not going to be told how to re-live our feelings, pains and aspirations by anybody who speaks from the platform of his own rickety culture. We'll write our poems in narrative form; we'll write journalistic pieces in poetry form; we'll dramatise our poetic experiences; we'll poeticise our historical dramas. We will do all these things at the same time.

## conclusion

In the 1990s the institutional power of the conservative liberals remains secure, and they use this privilege to disseminate minority values and to naturalise their continuing economic and ideological domination. This has been evident in the reception of Albie Sachs' paper 'Preparing ourselves for freedom' (De Kok & Press 1990:19-29), and, in particular, the response to Sachs' (1990:19) partly serious, partly tongue-in-cheek proposition that 'our members should be banned from *saying* that culture is a weapon of struggle'. Despite Sachs' framing statement and his subsequent reminders that his paper was written for an audience of ANC cadres in exile, many of the beneficiaries of oppression (including conservatives) used the paper to support their contention that literature should be apolitical. Therefore, instead of cautioning cadres against the use of rhetoric as a substitute for action, Sachs' words were used to quell politically-sensitive literary constructions.

There has been little question of taking into account positions that challenged Sachs, such as Meintjies (De Kok & Press 1990:30-35) and Malange *et al* (1990:99-103). For instance, in 1995, Rolf Solberg was still eliding Sachs' point in his comment that 'Albie Sachs suggested putting a ban on the Struggle as a theme for writers' (Attridge & Jolly 1998:181). This was stated during an interview with Wally Serote, who responded to a question regarding 'protest literature' in the following way: 'I don't want to call anything protest poetry. It is a very unfortunate category and name' (Attridge & Jolly 1998:181). It is symptomatic of the continuing hegemony of conservative liberal scholarship in South Africa that there is only an uneasy defensiveness in response to such questionable constructions. Clearly the maps (i.e. the representations) of the conservative liberal hegemony cannot be mistaken for the territory, any more than the maps of the ancient cartographers who thought that there had to be dragons in the region of southern Africa. Scholarship that addresses the resistance literature with greater rigour and ideological clarity is needed if we are to learn more about the subject than the inclinations of its professional observers.

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