A THIRST QUENCHED BY FREEDOM

Aspects of the Transcendent in Contemporary Black South African Poetry

By JOSEPH WILSON

ONE SUNDAY MORNING IN SEPTEMBER 1990, celebrating eucharist in the black township church of Tembisa in South Africa, I leaned over the chalice and continued the words of consecration. I had been attacked just the previous day by three black youths who hijacked my car and burnt it, leaving me in the dusty street bleeding. When I came upon the words, '. . . it will be shed for you', hurtful feelings began to overwhelm me. I broke down crying. My black assistant standing next to me gripped me tightly by the arm. I felt an extraordinary sense of connectedness: me, but the latest victim of violence holding aloft that bitterest of cups of suffering on behalf of South African Christians who are fed with tears for their daily bread and abundance of tears for their drink. From then on the black South African poetry, and that of Mongane Wally Serote in particular, would take on deeper meaning for me. I had just dipped my life and tongue 'into the depths of our bitterness'.[1]

As a non-South African, the obvious disadvantages in attempting to write of spirituality in contemporary black South African poetry are clear. I 'don't know to the bone like they do'.[2] While peppering the seminal themes with other South African poetic voices and the spirituality of Gustavo Gutierrez, schematically I thought it good to follow Mongane Wally Serote[3] in particular, since both his poetry and his life reaffirm, more than most, a belief in the fundamental spiritual values of the heart, while also proving a most effective access to some of the most troubled townships in Africa (Alexandra and Soweto) and the psyche of the modern alienated African.

The role of the writer

'Writing is an affirmation, not only of the individual, but through him of the nameless and voiceless multitude who must rely on him to define

the validity of their right to be.'[4] So wrote Andre Brink in 1980. A heady decade later, after 'enduring a cannonade of crises',[5] all the giddy moments at the edge, a low-grade civil war, the geysers of blood, South Africa has chosen wisely to negotiate her revolution. Both South Africa and her writers have now got to deal with the legacy of the past. Finding himself 'in a troubled country, scarred by the past, uneasy in the present, anxious yet resolute about the future',[6] the South African writer must endeavour to 'avenge the debris of our memories' (*Sel*, p 130).[7] Not unlike the post-exilic prophet, he admonishes his people to recover the preciousness that was lost. Memory therefore becomes one of the major themes of all contemporary South African literature.

PART I: IDENTITY LOST

'We have lost too many things' (Serote)

Though continents apart, the black South African poet Serote and the Latin American liberation theologian Gutierrez have come upon a similar spiritual well. Using different divining tools, one finds poetically what the other discovers spiritually. Beginning in the same foul rag and bone shop of wretchedness, poetry and liberation theology discover the transcendent in the very depths of wounded humanity. Accessing those transcendent themes in contemporary black South African poetry therefore begins with the experience of loss.

'Awakening on Friday morning June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.' This is how Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, a founder of the ANC, began his book *Native life in South Africa*, an outcry against The Land Act, one of the most harrowing laws ever passed, described by Mafika Gwala as 'the pitchdarkness of dispossession'.[8]

Older writers like Ezekiel Mphahlele point out that colonization by Europeans taught Africans to be uncivilized in a western kind of way. The scramble for Africa damaged irreparably many key African values:

> They've done it to me –
> taught me violence,
> revenge of Europe,
> uncivilized me
> by the laws of
> paper
> gun
> baton . . .
> they scrambled
> for my mother[9]

The key to understanding virtually the whole of Wally Serote's poetry and most of contemporary black South African poetry lies in the quest for *personal identity* and *freedom.* Serote's spiritual journey is as compelling as the Prodigal's and as old as Ulysses'. 'The only truth any man can tell is his own' wrote the South African playwright Athol Fugard in February 1976. 'Why does it always work? Given the basic conditions of truth, compassion, love. That a man anywhere – concerned with the petty issues of his life, can end up talking to all of us about our unique selves!'[10]

'We knew that the kraal had fallen' (Serote)

'The tribe is broken' is Alan Paton's metaphor in *Cry the beloved country* to describe the collapse of fundamental African values. Serote's phrase is almost identical: 'And we knew that the kraal had fallen' ('Behold', p 110). Serote enters a broken African world and from the very start senses that things are not right. What should have begun with so much promise – the day an African child enters the world, 'bundled in . . . an immense love and . . . flooded in light' (*NB*, p 54), conferring that primal experience of identity so important to every African baby – instead initiates the nightmare of personal alienation. His use of the lower case 'i'[11] for the personal pronoun accentuates the sense of loss:

> as if this is my oldest experience
> like i have a wound, a secret
> a burden that loads my eyes down.
> (*NB*, p 12)

Bicca Maseko's line, 'Dont smile at me nurse; I gate crashed into this life',[12] tries to relate the shock of realizing one is born black in South Africa. Serote's discovery is similar: 'I'm a blackmanchild . . . now i feel the strain' (*NB*, p 16). Who forgets the scar left by his mother's womb which 'burnt my flesh and left it black like me'? The bleakness of alienation is brilliantly conveyed in the harrowing lines: 'Mama/ you grew a hollow and named it me' (*NB*, p 33).

Serote's quest for his African soul

As if the dual discovery of being born black and alienated into 'the down trodding despair of being exploited' (*Sel*, p 131) were not enough, Serote finds a still deeper wound within, the worst kind of all, spiritual: 'God turning away leaving his shadow . . . i emerge a wound in my gut' (*NB*, p 36). While this marks the beginning of his religious disillusionment, paradoxically it is also the beginning of his spiritual journey. 'Our

masters pray/ know god/ lay their hands on the bible' (*Sel*, p 133) gave him a racist identity document, 'my pass my life' (*Sel*, p 22). This told him who he was, as it disqualified him from belonging to the land of his birth. In Gwala's words, it created 'pigsty truth about his fellow man'.[13] When Serote writes, 'i come from the road/ it incised a four-letter word on my heels' (*NB*, p 33), we know his humiliation is complete.

Similar warnings against the disjunction of piety and abusive power come from poems like 'Just a passerby' by Oswald Mtshali. The poet sees a man being beaten savagely; he enters a church and prays: 'Lord! I love you, I also love my neighbour. Amen'. Returning home he is asked if he heard of the death of his brother. 'Oh! No! I heard nothing. I've been to church.'[14] Lesego Rampolokeng is more devastating: 'Some are hypochristians some are wine-drunken catholics/ casting a coy look at the prayer-book'.[15]

Serote's early disparagement of religion stems from the perception that it is no more than an escape. It becomes merely one substance among others which helps township residents to numb out.

> Remember . . . how you or i or anyone of us
> . . . how we got drunk
> with whiskey, dagga and religions
> (*Sel*, p 136)

In Serote's sixty-page epic poem, *No baby must weep* (1975), we glimpse briefly the inadequacy of the Church in trying to meet the unfolding spiritual needs of modern South African youth. Serote tells his mother that he no longer wants to go to church, preferring instead to go about with his companions who seek the new ways of sex, alcohol and earthy jokes about women. Once when his dad took him to church as a youth, he found the perfume of the women frightening and so he left by the other door. It was a door that would lead him onto the township street, the beginning of his prodigal search in 'those little silly houses where men's voices buzz/ hanging on the mirage of alcohol' (*NB*, p 14). There, 'of the black miseries jive',[16] he 'groped in the dark street/ searching for me/ in broken automobiles' (*NB*, p 40) which like the streets themselves go nowhere. There 'Children pick the idea of making children' (*NB*, p 46), because a young woman 'knows nothing about her body/ but lots about mathematics' (*NB*, pp 26–7). Serote was just another one of those who succumbed, in the words of Lesego Rampolokeng, to 'the glitter at the bottom of the gutter'.[17]

Religion may have patched the wounds of people with the pages of the Bible. But any spirituality which fails to help Africans nourish,

connect and realize the deepest longings of their heart to be human and free, is doomed to failure. Every page of Serote's poetry is a testimony to the need for such spirituality.

'My brothers in the street' (Serote)

It is on those 'squeaking blood-stained hungry-rat battlegrounds' (*NB*, p 46) called townships that the modern South African loses his soul as often as he loses his life. In one of his early poems, 'My brothers in the street', Serote tries to confront their in-turned anger: 'Listen it's black women who are crying' (*Sel*, p 31), and 'spelling it out in blood';[18] but they don't listen. Alexandra township becomes 'a cage of insane beasts born of black women' (*Sel*, p 60). 'Corpses still stride the streets like scarecrows' (*NB*, p 50) and the women of Alex have come to know 'that graves are not only below the earth' (*Sel*, p 47).

'Here on these banks death is alive' (Serote)

Both Serote and Gutierrez find themselves in the middle of cultures of death. 'Wherever we look, we see death.'[19] Peruvians 'are today becoming increasingly conscious of living in a foreign land that is hostile to them, a land of death'.[20] In South Africa, 'people dying poor and foolish deaths' (*Sel*, p 131). 18,000 have died in political violence in the last decade; and sometimes it seems all 18,000 make it into the pages of his poetry. Serote is unable to render blood and passion as cold, sterile statistics because 'all shout/ the terrible deaths of my father' ('Behold', p 108). He knows them by name: his brother, 'his deathbed a muddy donga/ his black miseries to the core of silence' (*Sel*, p 33); his sister Matsidiso 'sprawled in the dusty street sipping death' (*Sel*, p 116). Again and again 'memory drags those terrible poses of my brothers who fell' ('Behold', p 105). Like one obsessed, he returns as if to take the poetic death mask. He makes us look; no sheet is pulled to cover.

But Serote, like other African poets, has grown tired: 'We are sick of dying/ crawling in wakeful hours/ screaming in dreams/ this thing has taken too long'.[21]

> I cannot look
> for your legs are chained apart
> and your dirty peticoat is soaked in blood
> blood from your ravaged wound.
>
> (*Sel*, p 49)

And again:

> ah
> africa
> which death do you not know [?]
> ('Behold', p 102)

If blacks were becoming used to looking 'at the menu at hospital, morgues and cemeteries' (*NB*, p 19), some of their poets were growing uneasy, 'agitated by the death I live'.[22] 'What have we done with life to make it so frighteningly unlivable [?]' (*Third*, p 13).

'An issue of furious fires' (Serote)

There is no respite. Escapes calibrate from the benign to the harmful. Even work is no escape, though without it 'waiting would be impossible'.[23] Alienation comes from the knowledge that cities only want black people's sweat: 'tired from the hurrying of a city/ spirits maimed by commands'.[24] Others struggled, sometimes paying the ultimate price: 'I'll either be on heroic shoulders/ or in a black hearse'.[25] The young, 'impatient as a droplet of water on fire' (*NB*, p 28), loaded with revolutionary maxims, were 'hot for quick results'.[26] Others thought freedom lay through education: 'A missionary gave him a name/ and a key to his kraal'.[27] Many could echo Serote's sentiments: 'I have never had a life' (*Sel*, p 56), so 'death can be a way of saying/ things' (*Sel*, p 122).

The wretched

Gutierrez' 'fellowship of the wretched' finds a parallel in Serote's downtrodden grannies, 'their old gaits dragging their shadows' (*NB*, p 47). That generation felt constrained to drag their suitcases of black shame and hurts and unpack them on a communal mound of infamy: 'There is the hill now'. It is one monument to infamous memory Serote as writer undertakes to destroy. They may very well be 'those withered by hope'.[28] Yet it is a hope which leaves the younger generation bewildered, as they stare at the mute sky, 'trying to break/ the frozen deafness' of God (*NB*, p 47); 'maybe their red hearts have hope/ the last secret of the wretched' (*NB*, p 47).

'Who are we at this disastrous hour [?]' (Serote)

The role of the poet in 'a dry white season' inevitably leads Serote to assume the mantle of patriarch and prophet. His brilliant descriptions of individuals serve to show how much his people have been brutalized by all kinds of violence, including 'poverty', which Fugard (in his January

1966 notebook) called 'the violence of immediacy'. Like Moses, sick at heart, he 'can touch the pulsating pain of those i love' (*NB*, p 13). Like Micah, he sees the glaring contradictions of an unequal world where 'children . . . come from hungry stomachs', while the rich, 'tired of mansions go out camping' (*Third*, p 4); where the servant who serves tea to the woman 'who's lying in bed at 10 a.m. sick with wealth' (*Sel*, p 42) very likely comes from a

> hut whose door is as thin as paper
> shaking in the winter night
> and rattling from the footsteps of bandits.
> (*Third*, p 7)

Gutierrez agrees: 'The real issue in this situation is becoming increasingly clear to us today: poverty means death'.[29] For Serote, Africans have become such brutalized 'dead things' that they are no longer 'moved by the sight of machine-gunned children' (*NB*, p 25). It pains him to see the macabre tea-serving, 'buttockless . . . empty woman' (*Sel*, p 61). Like Jeremiah he complains bitterly: 'The river is dark, but wants to take a look' (*NB*, p 47).

In great poetry full of pathos he asks a frightening question of modern Africa:

> this day drops down and breaks
> empty
> and we can only think it was not empty
> . . . what if the future has its back to us [?]
> (*NB*, p 28)

From birth onwards, it seems that Africans, in Njabulo Ndebele's colourful line, 'make paths to nowhere from the nipple'.[30]

'These streets lead to nowhere' (Serote)

Serote must confront finally what he also has become: 'The sea of identity is tears',[31] the wound in his own breast 'that bleeds every day' (*NB*, p 31); the 'scream locked in beneath my flesh' (*NB*, p 51); 'Mama . . . you never told me this could happen' (*NB*, p 41). In his volume, *The night keeps winking*, Serote sought 'someone' who might teach him 'how to mount the wound and fight'. That someone, he now discovers, can be no one but himself. In these streets which he had walked all his life, the painful but ultimately liberating truth is that 'these streets lead to nowhere' (*NB*, p 45).

PART II: IDENTITY FOUND

Exile

Not finding his heart in African streets, it was perhaps foolhardy of him to imagine he could find it in overseas streets whose names he cannot pronounce. 'We have twisted our tongues into harvard and oxford hisses . . . never in terms with peace' (*NB*, p 36). Not yet speaking the language of his heart he searches for Africa, whose 'gentle hands' in turn 'search for my peace' (*NB*, p 41). It is time to return home, not to his father's house but to Mother Africa.

The nurturance of Mama Africa and the meaning of the African Child

In his famous 'Zulu girl', Roy Campbell has noticed this special nurturance of Africa and how African identity as well as its misfortunes are weaned in the child even in a simple thing like breast feeding. The feed becomes a metaphor for the larger nurturance of Africa to its people:

> Her body looms above him like a hill
> within whose shade a village lies at rest
> . . . The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes . . .[32]

In sacred gestures to Mother Africa that help him regain his primal connectedness with Africa, he takes off his shoes. We are reminded again of Gutierrez' *We drink from our own wells*:

> Let me drink your love mama
> let it spill its warmth on my cold bosom
> (*NB*, p 42)

In the moment of prodigal embrace, the release that comes is as emotionally healing as it is cathartic.

> the bone of my heart broke
> and the marrow spilled
> (*NB*, p 60)

Truly an African son has come home.

Memory and Ubuntu

When Victor Frankl was stripped by the Nazis of his good clothes, he was given the worn rags of a dead prisoner. In one of the pockets he found *'Shema Israel':* 'Remember, Israel, the Lord is your God and you

shall love him'. It is when everything appears to be lost, doubting even our own humanity, it is then that memory becomes the compass of a recoverable human identity. In 'Ngwana wa Azania' Black Consciousness poet Mothobi Mutloatse speaks of a child, liberating the world 'with Nkulunkulu's [Zulu word for God] greatest gift to man: ubuntu'.[33] *Ubuntu*, that very important spiritual African value, is very difficult to translate; some render it 'humanity', 'fellow feeling', 'brotherhood', but no English word really captures its richness.

While Serote does not use the word *ubuntu*, it is evident throughout his poetry. We glimpse it for the shepherd-boy in the Karoo who, though despised by the very dust itself, 'has a mother'; for the man who 'weeps like a woman giving birth/while he pleaded for his life' (*Sel*, p 48); he was 'someone's one time baby' (*Sel*, p 60). It is a transcendent spirituality which affirms that 'dignity is held tight in the sweating cold hands of death' ('Behold', p 111). *Ubuntu* allows the African to reclaim his spiritual equilibrium, even his soul. In the words of Athol Fugard, 'All we are left with finally is the possibility of a dignity and the price of that is the Truth'.

'We did amazing things to say simple things' (Serote)

Andre Brink believes violence is 'the language culture speaks when no other valid articulation is left open to it'.[34] In saying: 'we are human and this is our land' (*Sel*, p 133), Africans must come to terms with the memory of 'the cruel things we did to each other where, mad we killed each other' (*Sel*, p 131).

It becomes the poet's job 'to explain the articulate vulgarity of lifelessness' (*Third*, p 19), in order that he can the more affirm life: 'life is worth living,/ can be lived and must be lived' (*Third*, p 11). A land at the cutting edge of death – Johannesburg, the current murder capital of the world – is in such need of a prophet of life. The paradox of Serote's verse is that it is so full of death because he is so passionately in love with life. In a recoverable spirituality where 'a person becomes a person through other people' the poet must reaffirm, on the people's behalf, simple things often overlooked, even 'desecrated' in modern Africa:

> but by god
> god made me in his image not
> of cats or birds
>
> (*NB*, p 27)

The children of the Dark Continent, grown so used to the 'intricate canopy of nightmares' (*NB*, p 45), the blood-letting Africa of Kigali and

Soweto, are now desperately in need of sitting on Africa's nurturing lap of hope and of being 'let . . . into your bursting passion' (*NB*, p 42), and of hearing the forgotten words, 'I'm not far away from you, don't fear' (*Third*, p 19).

Like the *Little prince*, Serote has glimpsed what is truly essential both for himself and his people. 'We speak in search of simple things . . . to make us human' (*Third*, p 7). In a world where life is such a risk, *ubuntu* helps the African to remember, because 'it is simple things which are forgotten/ desecrated/ and defiled', a refrain he repeats throughout *Third World express*. Though many things of the past are now out of reach, according to Serote, it becomes vitally important that a brutalized people remember and recover the essence of their precious spiritual patrimony. To 'give life a touch of eternity'; to love life, so that 'we can dare death'. Thus *Third Word express* comes to a crescendo affirming life.

Home

Only after first being nurtured by Africa, grounded in a recovered sense of who he is as a child of Africa with a wounded heart, is an African now in a position to confront his horrendous humiliation. Alone in the dirty streets of past hurt for the final time, he must feel, in a moment of purgation, the depth of alienation, so that he can the more powerfully feel the salving of his wound:

> i stand here/ motherless/ fatherless
> let my moment absolve me
> (*NB*, p 49)

Having sung in many 'broken tongues' the 'songs made by chains' ('Behold', p 110) for too long, all Serote wanted, 'all he needed after all' was 'to have a home and to sing my songs' ('Behold', p 107). Ultimately it is a home for his human, African heart. 'And we can never be nice about claiming a home' (*Sel*, p 121).

'To be alive to hear this song is a victory' say the words of a traditional West African song. Now that the night which made the South African day is largely over, it is Serote's prayer as it is ours that he 'will no longer write about people/ dying in the street . . . and babies suffocating in suitcases in muddy dongas' (*Sel*, p 56). Never again should our children be 'knowledgable of hideous nights' (*Sel*, p 129), or the truth be 'more grim to tell because there are fewer celebrations'.[35] May there be 'no ruined wall, no exile/ no sound of weeping in our streets' (Psalm 143), 'Because at the depth of the heart of every and any man/ beats the love for freedom' (*Sel*, p 130). The kraal has fallen, now is the time to rebuild,

to look for the simpler, more important things: 'We know something about laughter and making homes/ and in our paths strangers were never lost' ('Behold', p 108). Time to listen again to 'what our old people used to talk about' ('Behold', p 102), and learn what they mean when they say, 'Even where there is no pot to boil, there should be fire'.[36]

> I know now that is what you are, Africa
> Happiness, contentment, and fulfilment,
> and a small bird singing on a mango tree.[37]

And grasp that these truly are our few but final needs.

NOTES

In the following notes the full title of each book referred to is given, with publication details, only in the first reference.

[1] Mongane Wally Serote, *Selected poems* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1989), p 27.
[2] Jack Cope in Michael Chapman (ed), *A century of South African poetry* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1993), p 257.
[3] Wally Serote, born in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, in 1944. A prolific and accomplished poet. In political detention for nine months in 1969. Won the Ingrid Jonker Prize in 1973. Received a degree in fine arts from Columbia University, New York. Exiled in Gaborone. Currently heads the ANC's department of Arts and Culture in Johannesburg.
[4] Andre Brink, *Mapmakers: writing in a state of siege* (London: Faber, 1982), p 205.
[5] Bill Keller, *New York Times*, 4 May 1994.
[6] Cf Andre Brink, 'An uneasy freedom', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 Sept 1993.
[7] Because of the extensive use of quotation, it has been necessary to abbreviate his poetical works thus: *Sel: Selected poems of Wally Serote* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1989); *NB: No baby must weep* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975); 'Behold': 'Behold Mama, flowers' (1978) in *Selected poems, op. cit.*; *Third: Third World express* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992).
[8] Mafika Pascal Gwala, *Jol' iinkomo* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1977), p 64.
[9] Ezekiel Mphahlele in Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (eds), *The return of the Amasi bird: black South African poetry 1891–1981* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1991), p 170.
[10] Athol Fugard, notebook entry for 1977.
[11] Serote has other grammatical idiosyncrasies: his sparing use of full stops, question marks and other helpful punctuation points makes for a difficult read at times.
[12] Bicca Maseko in *A century of South African poetry*, p 329.
[13] M. Gwala, *Jol' iinkomo*, p 50.
[14] Oswald Mtshali in John de Gruchy (ed), *Cry justice: prayers, meditations and readings from South Africa* (London: Collins, 1986), pp 179–180.
[15] *New Coin* vol 29, no 2 (December 1993), p 16.
[16] M. Gwala, *Jol' iinkomo*, p 45.
[17] *New Coin* vol 29, no 2, p 20.
[18] M. Gwala in *A century of South African poetry*, p 353.
[19] Gustavo Gutierrez, *We drink from our own wells: the spiritual journey of a people* (New York: Orbis, 1984), p 10.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 11.
[21] Sydney Sipho Sepamla, *Hurry up to it* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975), p 61.

[22] S. Sepamla in Michael Chapman (ed), *The paperbook of South African English poetry* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1993), p 176.
[23] Mike Nicol in *A century of South African poetry*, p 309.
[24] Sepamla in *The paperbook*, p 39.
[25] Zinjiva Nkondo Africa in *The return of the Amasi bird*, p 265.
[26] Njabul Ndebele in *The paperbook*, p 242.
[27] Roy MacNab in *The paperbook*, p 119.
[28] Sepamla in *The paperbook*, p 49.
[29] Gutierrez, *We drink from our own wells*, p 9.
[30] N. Ndebele in *The return of the Amasi bird*, p 217.
[31] Mongane Serote in *The return of the Amasi bird*, p 218.
[32] Roy Campbell in *A century of South African poetry*, p 122.
[33] Mothobi Mutloatse in *A century of South African poetry*, p 362.
[34] Andre Brink, *Mapmakers*, p 228.
[35] Arthur Nortje, 'Discovery' in *The return of the Amasi bird*, p 188.
[36] Ezekiel Mphahlele, from his short story, 'The suitcase'.
[37] Abioseh Nicol in Barbara Nolen (ed), *Voices of Africa* (London: Fontana, 1974).