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WRITERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE NEW BLACK POETS

“Poetry does indeed have a very special place in this country. It arouses people and shapes their minds. No wonder the birth of our new intelligentsia is accompanied by a craving for poetry never seen before... It brings people back to life.”

This was written of the contemporary Soviet Union by Nadezhda Mandelstam, widow of the poet Osip Mandelstam, in her autobiography, *Hope Against Hope*. But perhaps the same might be said of the new poetry being written in South Africa by black South Africans. Three individual collections have been published within eighteen months. I know of at least two more that are to come, this year. An anthology representative of the work of eleven poets is in the press at the time of writing. Poems signed with as yet unknown names crop up in the little magazines; there are readings at universities and in private houses, since the law doesn't allow blacks to read to whites or mixed audiences in public places. For the first time, black writers' works are beginning to be bought by ordinary black people in the segregated townships, instead of only by liberal or literary whites and the educated black elite.

In the 1950s and early 60s prose writing by black South Africans was some of the best on the continent. Nearly all those seminal black writers went into exile in the Sixties, and their works are banned. The lopping-off of a young indigenous tradition--as distinct from the central tradition of the European language the black writer uses -- has had a stunting effect on prose writing. No fiction of any real quality has been written since then by a black writer still living in South Africa. It seems that a certain connection has been axed between black fiction writers

and their material. Aspirant writers are intimidated not only by censorship as such but also by the fear that anything at all controversial, set out by a black in the generally explicit medium of prose, makes the writer suspect, since the correlation of articulacy and political insurrection, so far as blacks are concerned, is firmly lodged in the minds of the Ministers of the Interior, Justice and Police. Polymorphous fear cramps the hand. Would-be writers are so affected that they have ignored gigantic contemporary issues that have set their own lives a-wash. Such stories as there are, for example, re-pulp the clichés of the apartheid situation — the illicit drinking den, the black-white love affair — that have been so thoroughly blunted by overuse in literature good and bad that they can be trusted to stir the censors and police as little as they can be trusted to fire the people's imagination. Meanwhile, apartheid has bull-dozed on over black lives since the 1960s and brought experiences such as forced mass resettlement that make the shebeen and the bedroom marginal by comparison.

Out of this paralytic silence, suspended between fear of expression and the need to give expression to an ever greater pressure of grim experience, has come the black writer's subconscious search for a form less vulnerable than those that led a previous generation into bannings and exile. In other countries, writers similarly placed have found a way to survive and speak through the use of different kinds of prose forms. Perhaps, if black writing had not been so thoroughly beheaded and truncated in the Sixties, there would have been creative minds nimble enough to keep it alive through something like the *skaz* — a Russian genre, dating from Czarist times, which concentrates a narrative of wide-ranging significance in a compressed work that derives from an oral tradition of story-telling, and takes full advantage of the private and double meanings contained in colloquial idiom. Both the oral tradition and the politically-charged idiom exist in black South Africa.

Or the solution might have been found in the adoption of the Aesopean genre — as in a fable, you write within one set of categories, knowing your readers will realize that you are referring to another, an area where explicit comment is tabu. Camus used this device in *La Peste*, and again, Stalin's generation of writers learned to be dab hands at it.

The cryptic mode is a long-established one; it has been resorted to in times and countries where religious persecution or political oppression drives creativity back into itself, and forces it to become its own hiding-place, from which, ingenious as an oracle, a voice that cannot be identified speaks the truth in riddles and parables not easily defined as subversive. In South Africa there are 97 definitions of what is officially "undesirable" in literature: subversive, obscene, or otherwise "offensive". They are not always invoked, but are there when needed to suppress a particular book or silence an individual writer. Seeking to escape them, among other even more sinister marks of official attention, black writers have had to look for survival away from the explicit if not to the cryptic then to the implicit; and in their case, they have turned instinctively to poetry. Professor Harry Levin defines a poem as "a verbal artifact" whose "arrangement of signs and sounds is likewise a network of associations and responses, communicating implicit information." In demotic, non-literary terms, a poem can be both hiding-place and loud-hailer. That was what black writers within South Africa were seeking.

There will be many people whose toes will curl at this crude pragmatic conception of how poetry comes to be written. One cannot simply "turn" to poetry. It is simply not there, available to anybody with a few hours of home study to spare, like a correspondence course in accountancy or learning to play the recorder. As a prose writer, I don't need reminding of the levels of literature, where poets sit on Kilimanjaro. That snowy crown is not within reach of everyone who wants to write; even those who can start a grassfire across the prose plain will find themselves short of oxygen up at that height.

Poetry *as a last resort* is indeed a strange concept; and a kind of inversion of the enormous problems of skill and gifts implied in electing to write poetry at all. Many who are doing so in South Africa to-day are not poets at all, merely people of some talent attempting to use certain conventions and unconventions associated with poetry in order to express their feelings in a way that may hope to get a hearing. One of them has said:

To label my utterings poetry
and myself a poet
would be as self-deluding

as the planners of parallel development.
 I record the anguish of the persecuted
 whose words are whimpers of woe
 wrung from them by bestial laws.
 They stand one chained band
 silently asking one of the other
 will it never be the fire next time?
 ("To label my utterings poetry" by James Matthews)

From the Icelandic saga to Symbolism, from a Chaucer creating English as a democratic literary medium to a Günter Grass recreating areas of the German language debased by Nazi usage, writers in their place at the centre of their particular historical situation have been forced by this kind of empiricism and pragmatism to "turn to" one form of expression rather than another.

There are two questions to ask of the black writers who have "turned to" poetry in South Africa. In the five years since this spate of poetry began, these questions have been shown to be so bound together that I don't know which to put first. So, without prejudice at this point: Question — through the implicit medium of poetry, are black writers succeeding in establishing or re-establishing a black protest literature within South Africa? Question — are they writing good poetry?

These questions, as I have said, seem to have demonstrated an indivisibility that I hesitate to claim as a universal axiom. Where protest speaks from a good poem, even one good line, both questions are answered in a single affirmative. When Mandlenkosi Langa, in his "Mother's Ode to a Still-born Child", writes:

"It is not my fault
 that you did not live
 to be a brother sister
 or lover of some black child
 that you did not experience pain
 pleasure voluptuousness and salt in the wound
 that your head did not stop a police truncheon
 that you are not a permanent resident of a prison island"

his irony says more than any tract describing in spent emotives the life-expectations of the black ghetto under white oppression in the police state, etc. When, writing again of a new-born child already dead — symbol of the constant death-in-life that runs through this black poetry — Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali in "An Abandoned Bundle" makes

he image of dogs "draped in red bandanas of blood" scavenging the body of a baby dumped on a location rubbish heap, he says more about black infant mortality than any newspaper expose, and by the extension that the total vision of his poem provides, more about the cheapness of life where race is the measure of worth.

The themes chosen by the new black poets are committed in the main to the individual struggle for physical and spiritual survival under oppression. "I" is the pronoun that prevails, rather than "we", but the "I" is the Whitmanesque unit of multi-millions rather than the exclusive first person singular. There is little evidence of group feeling, except perhaps in one or two of the young writers who are within SASO (South African Students' Organisation), the black student organisation whose politico-cultural manifesto is a combination of negritude with Black Power on the American pattern.

The themes, like those of the poets who preceded the present generation (they were few in number and were forced into exile), are urban — although it is doubtful whether one can speak of the tradition or influence of a Kunene or a Brutus, here. Few of the young aspirants writing to-day have read even the early work of exiled writers: it was banned while they were still at school. The striking development of Dennis Brutus's later and recent work, for example, is unknown except by a handful of people who may have spotted a copy of Cosmo Pieterse's *Seven South African Poets* or *Thoughts Abroad* that has somehow slipped into a bookshop, although the statutory ban on Dennis Brutus would mean that the book itself is automatically banned.

It is axiomatic that the urban theme contains the classic crises: tribal and traditional values against Western values, peasant modes of life against the modes of an industrial proletariat, above all, the quotidian humiliations of a black's world made to a white's specifications. But in the work we are considering I believe there also can be traced distinct stages or stations of development in creating a black ethos strong enough to be the challenger rather than the challenged in these crises.

The starting-point is essentially post-Sharpeville — post-defeat of mass black political movements: the position that of young people cut off from political education and any objective formulation of their resentments against apartheid. The stations are three: distortion of

values by submission of whites; rejection of distortion; black/wh polarity - opposition on new ground.

In terms of the personal, immediate and implicit within which the poems move, the first station – distortion by submission – is often demonstrated by apartheid through the eyes of a child. Mike Dues writes in his poem “This Side of Town:”

Rested near swinging
sliding playground
with eager-eyed-black faces
'can we play on the swing'
a cowing no
in town the voice pleads
'I want to pee'
a hackneyed no
leads to the edge of town.

And James Matthews in “Two Little Black Boys”:

Two little black boys
standing in front of a public lavatory
one not bigger than a grasshopper
the other a head of hair taller
you can't go in there
the tall one said, pointing to the board
it's white people only.

It is not insignificant that incidents such as this are written about again and again. Through the recurrence of apparent trivialities in a child's life, certain objects – a swing, a public lavatory – can be seen becoming reified with the value of a sacred totem of white supremacy from whose ground the black child learns he is excluded without knowing why. But the question will come. James Matthews' poem ends:

Puzzled, the grasshopper replied
don't white people shit like me?

And Mike Dues, more ominously:

Later the face stronger
and voice bigger
will ask why.

A child's three question in one of Oswald Mtshali's poems "Boy on a Swing" --"Mother!/Where did I come?/ When will I wear long trousers?/Why was my father jailed?" --illustrate by their unconscious grouping how victimisation undergoes transformation into one of the immutable mysteries of a natural order. The experience of these black children takes on a dreadful logic as preparation for their sort of future in Stanley Mogoba's poem "Two Buckets" in which two buckets side by side, one a lavatory, the other filled with drinking water, define prison *as a destination*. Thrown into a cell at night, a man stumbles over the buckets:

In this startled manner
I made my entry
into a dark world
Where thousands of men
Pine and are forgotten.

It is the world of the pass laws, and the pass document is not a booklet of simple identification but a hateful possession that must be cherished because one cannot live without it — another inversion of values demanded by the white man. In "City Johannesburg," Mongane Wally Serote addresses the white city:

This way I salute you;
My hand pulses to my back trouser pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life
...My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
...Jo'burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me my love — my comic houses and people,
my donga and my ever-whirling dust

My death
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye

The city as an environment of distortion as well as dispossession creates the image in Njabulo Ndebele's poem:

I hid my love in the sewerage
Of a city; and when it was decayed,
I returned: I returned to the old lands.

Oswald Mtshali's country bird is shedding his identity along with his feathers when he takes a job as a city cleaner and says in "The Moulting Country Bird":

I wish
 I was not a bird
 red and tender of body
 with the mark of the tribe
 branded on me as fledgling
 hatched in the Zulu grass hut.

Pierced in the lobe of the ear
 by the burning spike of the elderman;
 he drew my blood like a butcher bird
 that impales the grasshopper on the thorn.

As a full fledged starling
 hopping in the city street,
 scratching the building corridor,
 I want to moult
 from the dung-smearred down
 tattered like a fieldworker's shirt.
 tighter than the skin of a snake
 that sleeps as the plough turns the sod.

Boots caked with mud,
 Wooden stoppers flapping from earlobes
 and a beaded little gourd dangling on a hirsute chest,
 all to stoke the incinerator.

I want to be adorned
 by a silken suit so scintillating in sheen,
 it pales even the peacock's plumage,
 and catches the enchanted eye
 of a harlot hiding in an alley:
 'Come! my moulten bird,
 I will not charge you a price!'

Njabulo Ndebele, one of the youngest of the new writers, is surely speaking of the same man when he writes, in "I hid my love in the sewerage":

O who am I?
 Who am I?
 I am the hoof that once
 Grazed in silence upon the grass
 But now rings like a bell on tarred streets.

Ultimate submission is the acceptance of white materialist values as a goal while at the same time they are by definition unattainable. Again Mtshali has understood this incomparably. In much-imitated poems his

city black wears shoes made in America, has a wife who uses lightening cream, a mistress, a car, but:

He knows
 he must carry a pass.
 He don't care for politics
 He don't go to church
 He knows Sobukwe
 He knows Mandela
 They're in Robben Island,
 'So what? That's not my business!
 ("The Detribalized")

This city black does the "Chauffeur Shuffle", "a carving of black-wood/in a peaked cap/clutching the wheel of the white man's car in white-gloved hands"; he is "Always a Suspect", dressed like a gentleman in white shirt and suit but trudging "the city pavements/side by side with 'madam'/who shifts her handbag from my side to the other/and looks at me with eyes that say/'Ha! Ha! I know who you are;/beneathe those fine clothes ticks the heart of a thief.' "

The Sartrean and Fanonist theory of realising oneself in terms of the Other, of becoming someone else's projection rather than oneself (the orphan Genet a thief because that is the image in which society recognises his existence) reaches its apogee in the term "Non-White". That is the official identity of any South African who is black, brown, coffee-coloured or yellow. Mtshali's non-white describes himself:

If I tell the truth
 I'm detestable.
 If I tell lies
 I'm abominable.
 If I tell nothing
 I'm unpredictable.
 If I smile to please
 I'm nothing but an obsequious sambo. ("Always a Suspect")

And he accepts his non-white non-value by seeing, in turn, fulfilment as the vantage point from which the white man makes this valuation:

I want my heaven now,
 Here on earth in Houghton and Parktown;
 a mansion
 two cars or more
 and smiling servants.
 Isn't that heaven? ("This Kid Is No Goat")

The ironic note of the last phrase – no trumpet call, but ringing in the ears just the same – serves to mark the transition to the second station in the development of the black ethos as reflected in these poets. Mike Dues uses irony both as approach and technique in a terse poem, “You Never Know”, that is at once also an anecdote and a wry joke. We are eavesdropping on a telephone call to a sports event booking service:

‘Hello. Duncan Taylor here.’
 ‘I want nine tickets for Saturday.’
 ‘Nine you said. Hold on I’ll check the booking.
 I can give you eight in one row. One in front or back.’
 ‘Thank you. I’ll collect at the gate. How much?’
 ‘Well nine at R1 25. That is R11 25 Sir.’
 ‘Why the difference? A friend paid seventy-five cents last night.’
 ‘Oh! But that’s non-white.’
 ‘That’s what we want.’
 ‘I’m sorry, you sounded white.’

Soon the ironic note grows louder. Mandlenkosi Langa sets the scene in a “Non-Whites’ ” pension office with a white official behind the counter:

I lead her in
 A sepia figure 100 years old.
 Blue ice chips gaze
 And a red slash gapes:
 ‘What does she want?’
 I translate: ‘Pension, sir.’
 ‘Useless kaffir crone,
 Lazy as the black devil.
 She’ll get fuck-all.’
 I translate.
 ‘My man toiled
 And rendered himself impotent
 With hard labour.
 He paid tax like you.
 I am old enough to get pension.
 I was born before the great wars
 And I saw my father slit your likes’ throats!’
 I don’t translate, but
 She loses her pension anyhow. (“The Pension Jiveass”)

The rejection of distortion of self, the rejection of reification, take many attitudes and forms. What has to be dismantled is three hundred

years of spiritual enslavement; the poet is supremely aware that though the bricks and mortar of pass offices and prisons can be battered down, the bastille of Otherness must have its combination locks picked from within. And this is not easy. In creative terms, there is a casting about for the right means. The reference of the metaphors of sexual love is extended to become a celebration of blackness as a kind of personal salvation, as in Njabulo Ndebele's love poems:

I am sweeping the firmament with the mop
of your kinky hair;
...I shall gather you
into my arms, my love
and oil myself,
Yea, anoint myself with the
Night of your skin,
That the dust of the soil may stick on me;
That the birds of the sky may stick on me;
...let me play hide-and-peek
With an image of you in the
Dark, plum-dark forests of
your kinky hair,
And I shall not want. ("Five Letters to M.M.M.")

(Echoes here of Leon Damas' *Rendez-moi mes poupees noires.*)
Another means has been a use of the blues idiom of the Langston Hughes — Bessie Smith era, resuscitated in "cat" vocabulary by Black Power writers in America. Pascal Gwala uses it, writing from Durban:

Been watching this jive
For too long.
That's struggle.
West Street ain't the place
To hang around any more
...At night you see another dream
White and Monstrous
Dropping from earth's heaven,
Whitewashing your own Black Dream.
That's struggle.
Struggle is when
You have to lower your eyes
And steer time
With your bent voice.
When you drag along—
Mechanically.
Your shoulder refusing;

Refusing like a young bull
 Not wanting to dive
 Into the dipping tank
 Struggle is keying your tune
 To harmonize with your inside.
 ...Heard a child giggle at obscene jokes
 Heard a mother weep over a dead son;
 Heard a foreman say 'boy' to a labouring oupa
 Heard a bellowing, drunken voice in an alley.
 ...You heard struggle.
 Knowing words don't kill
 But a gun does.
 That's struggle.
 For no more jive
 Evening's eight
 Ain't never late.
 Black is struggle. ("Gumba Gumba Gumba")

Mongane Wally Serote uses the jazz beat but with vocabulary and imagery less derivative or obviously localised – generalised definitions of blackness, or anything else, are not for him. He puts a craftsmanlike agony to making-by-naming (Gerald Moore's and Ulli Beier's definition of the particular quality of African poetry) in a vocabulary and grammar genuinely shaped by black urban life in South Africa. There is a piercing subjectivity in his work, in which "black as struggle" becomes at times an actual struggle with the limits of language itself. He can discipline himself to the device of plain statement:

White people are white people
 They are burning the world.
 Black people are black people
 They are the fuel.
 White people are white people
 They must learn to listen.
 Black people are black people
 They must learn to talk. ("Ofay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase")

He can see the elements of an almost untainted black identity in the old people and children who are recurring lyrical motifs in his work. But when he seeks to recreate that identity by learning how it was destroyed, deeply wounded and marked himself, he wanders among the signs of signs, the abstractions of abstraction. The persona of his poems is often named "Ofay-Watcher" – one who watches Whitey, a definition that has overtones of the negative Non-White clinging to it like grave-clothes around the resurrected. Ofay-Watcher says:

I want to look at what happened;
 That done,
 As silent as the roots of plants pierce the soil
 I look at what happened,
 Whether above the houses there is always either smoke or dust,
 As there are always flies above a dead dog.
 I want to look at what happened.
 That done,
 As silent as plants show colour: green,
 I look at what happened,
 When houses make me ask: do people live there?
 As there is something wrong when I ask — is that man alive?
 I want to look at what happened,
 That done
 As silent as the life of a plant that makes you see it
 I look at what happened
 When knives creep in and out of people
 As day and night into time.
 I want to look at what happened,
 That done,
 As silent as plants bloom and the eye tells you: something has happened.
 I look at what happened
 When jails are becoming necessary homes for people
 Like death comes out of disease.
 I want to look at what happened. (“Ofay-Watcher Looks Back”)

Not only to look, but to express his findings in the long expletive of
 “What’s In This Black ‘Shit’ ”, gagging on its own bile of force-fed
 humiliation:

It is not the steaming rot
 In the toilet bucket,
 It is the upheaval of the bowels
 bleeding and coming out through the mouth
 And swallowed back,
 Rolling in the mouth
 Feeling its taste and wondering what’s next like it.

Finally he turns the term “black shit” on those who coined it:

I’m learning to pronounce this ‘shit’ well,
 Since the other day
 at the pass office
 when I went to get employment,
 The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg
 So I said, hard and with all my might, ‘Shit!’

I felt a little better;
 But what's good is, I said it in his face,
 A thing my father wouldn't dare do.
 That's what's in this black 'Shit'.

The Word becomes Weapon. At times, for this writer, there is no calligraphy capable of containing the force of resentment and he destroys his very medium by exploding the bounds of coherence:

,WORDS.
 Trying to get out.
 Words. Words. Words.
 By Whitey
 I know I'm trapped.
 Helpless
 Hopeless
 You've trapped me Whitey! Meem wann ge aot Fuc
 Pschwee ep booboduboooodu blllll
 Black books
 Flesh blood words shitr rr Haai,
 Amen. ("Black Bells")

You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse.
 Not from the political platform or the prisoner's dock, but howling from the subconscious, hate is conjured up in Serote's work. Yet he himself is not free to hate; he is tormented by its necessity for the black in South Africa:

To talk for myself
 I hate to hate
 But how often has it been
 I could not hate enough. ("That's Not My Wish")

Preoccupation with the metaphysics of hate belongs to the station of rejection of the distorted black self-image: James Matthews refers to the book he has published with Gladys Thomas as a collection of "declarations" and the unspoken overall declaration is that of those who have learned how to hate enough, and to survive. His is the manifesto of the black ethos as challenger, confronting the white ethos on black ground. In a kind of black nursery jingle by Gladys Thomas, entitled "Fall To-morrow", it speaks to blacks:

Don't sow a seed
 Don't paint a wall
 To-morrow it will have to fall

and to whites:

Be at home in our desert for all
 You that remade us
 Your mould will break
 And to-morrow you are going to fall.

The book is called "Cry Rage!" and the theme is often expressed in terms of actual and specific events. James Matthews is not diffident about taking a hold wherever he can on those enormous experiences of the long night of the black body-and-soul that prose writers have ignored. His obsession with the subject of resettlement is no more than an accurate reflection of the realities of daily life for the tens of thousands of blacks who have been moved by government decree to find shelter and livelihood in the bare veld of places dubbed Limehill, Dimbaza, Sada, Ilinge — often poetic names whose meanings seem to show malicious contempt for the people dumped there:

Valley of plenty is what it is called;
 where little children display their nakedness
 and stumble around on listless limbs
 ...where mothers plough their dead fruit into the soil
 their crone breasts dry of milk
 ...where menfolk castrated by degradation
 seek their manhood in a jug
 of wine as brackish as their bile. ("Valley of plenty")

Njabulo Ndebele invokes the intimate sorrows of forced removal less obviously and perhaps more tellingly. Limehills, Dimbanzas — these valleys of plenty seldom have adequate water supplies and the new "inhabitants" often have to walk a long way to fetch water:

There is my wife. There she is
 She is old under those four gallons of water,
 It was said taps in the streets
 Would be our new rivers.
 But my wife fetches the water
 (Down Second Avenue)
 We drink and we eat.
 I Watch my wife: she is old. ("Portrait of Love")

And Oswald Mtshali also takes as subjects some dark current events. He uses the Aesopean mode to write devastatingly of a ghastly recent disaster anyone living in South Africa would be able to identify

instantly, although its horrors are transliterated, so to speak, into Roman times. A year or two ago a prison van broke down on the road between Johannesburg and Pretoria; the policemen in charge went off to seek help, leaving the prisoners locked inside. It was a hot day; the van was packed; they died of suffocation while the traffic passed unconcerned and unaware:

They rode upon
the death chariot
to their Golgotha—
three vagrants
whose papers to be in Caesar's empire
were not in order.

The sun
shrivelled their bodies
in the mobile tomb
as airtight as canned fish.

We're hot!
We're thirsty!
We're hungry!

The centurion
touched their tongues
with the tip
of a lance
dipped in apathy:

"Don't cry to me
but to Caesar who
crucifies you."

A woman came
to wipe their faces.
She carried a dishcloth
full of bread and tea.

We're dying!

The centurion
washed his hands. ("Ride Upon The Death Chariot")

James Matthews writes of the Imam Abdullah Haron, one of the number of people who have died while in detention without trial. He writes of "dialogue" as "the cold fire where the oppressed will find no

warmth". Perhaps most significantly, he reflects the current black rejection of any claim whatever by whites, from radicals to liberals, to identify with the black struggle.

They speak so sorrowfully about the
children dying of hunger in Biafra
but sleep unconcerned about the rib-thin
children of Dimbaza. ("They Speak so Sorrowfully")

And again, in a poem called "Liberal Student Crap!":

The basis of democracy rests upon
Fraternity, Equality and not LSD
I should know fellows
Progressive policy the salvation of us all
You just don't understand
There's no-one as liberal as me
Some of my best friends are
Kaffirs, Coolies and Coons
Forgive me, I mean other ethnic groups
How could it be otherwise?
I'm Jewish; I know discrimination
from the ghetto to Belsen
So, don't get me all wrong
Cause I know just how you feel
Come up and see me sometime
My folks are out of town.

Whatever the justice of this view of young white people militant against apartheid — and increasing numbers of them are banned and restricted along with blacks — on the question of white proxy for black protest he has a final unanswerable word:

can the white man speak for me?
can he feel my pain when his laws
tear wife and child from my side
and I am forced to work a thousand miles away?

does he know my anguish
as I walk his streets at night
my hand fearfully clasping my pass?

is he with me in the loneliness
of my bed in the bachelor barracks
with my longing driving me to mount my brother?

will he soothe my despair
 as I am driven insane
 by scraps of paper permitting me to live?
 ("Can The White Man Speak For Me?")

He does not spare certain blacks, either, nor fear to measure the fashionable against the actual lineaments of the black situation. He addresses one of the black American singers who from time to time come to South Africa and perform for segregated audiences:

Say, Percy dad
 you ran out of bread that you got to
 come to sunny South Africa to sing soul
 or did you hope to find your soul
 in the land of your forefathers?
 ...Say, Percy dad
 will you tell nina simone back home
 that you, a soul singer, did a segregated act
 or will you sit back flashing silver dollar smiles
 as they cart the loot from your Judas role to the bank. ("Say Percy Dad")

And he accuses:

my sister has become a schemer and
 a scene-stealer
 ...songs of the village
 traded in for tin pan alley
 black is beautiful has become as artificial as the wig she wears.
 ("My sister has become a schemer")

Matthews uses indiscriminately the cliches of politics, tracts, and popular journalism and these deaden and debase his work. But occasionally the contrast between political catchwords and brutal sexual imagery carries a crude immediacy:

democracy
 has been turned
 into a whore
 her body ravished
 by those who pervert her
 in the bordello
 bandied from crotch to hand
 her breasts smeared
 with their seed... ("Democracy has been turned into a whore")

And in the context of fanatical laws framed in the language of reason, within which he is writing, even clichés take on new meaning: they mock the hollowness of high-sounding terms such as “separate development” or clinical ones such as “surplus people” — the behaviouristic vocabulary that gives a scientific gloss to mass removals of human beings.

James Matthews is a paradigm of the black writer in search of a form of expression that will meet the needs of his situation by escaping strictures imposed on free expression by that situation. He is older than other writers I have discussed; more than a decade ago he was writing short stories of exceptional quality. There were signs that he would become a fine prose writer. Whatever the immediate reasons were for the long silence that followed, the fact remains that there was little or no chance that the themes from the cataclysmic life around him he would have wished to explore would not have ended up as banned prose fiction. He stopped writing. He seems to have accepted that for him to have dealt honestly in prose with what he saw and experienced as a coloured man slowly accepting the black heritage of his mixed blood as his real identity, might be written but could not be read. He is the man who wrote the words I quoted at the beginning of this survey: “To label my utterings poetry/and myself a poet/ would be self-deluding...”

He is indeed not a poet, although his old creative gifts, uneasy in a medium to which they are not suited, now and then transform his “declarations” into something more than that. And so he is also an example of yet another distortion, this time within a black literature that expresses rejection of distortion and the assertion of new values for blacks: the black writer’s gifts can be, and often are squeezed into interstitial convolutions that do not allow him to develop in the direction in which development is possible for him as an artist.

At its best, “turning to poetry” has released the fine talents of an Mtshali and a Serote, a Dues and a young Ndebele. At its least, it has provided a public address system for the declarations of muzzled prose writers like Matthews. But if he stands where I have put him, as the symbolic figure of the situation of black writing, the sudden ban on his book “Cry Rage!” (during the very time when I was preparing these notes) suggests that black writing in South Africa may once again find

itself come full circle, back again at a blank, spiked wall. This is the first book of poems ever to be banned within South Africa. If there were to be a lesson to be learned in a game where it seems you can't win for long, it would seem to be that only good writing with implicit commitment is equal both to the inner demands of the situation and a chance of surviving publication, whatever the chosen literary form.

In terms of a literary judgment, yes, it is never enough to be angry. But unfortunately this does not hold good as an assurance that black poetry of real achievement can continue to be published and read in South Africa. Some of the best writing ever done by South Africans of all colours has not escaped, on grounds of quality, banning in the past. Black Orpheus, where now? How? What next?