Rivonia

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Abstract

The thesis is entitled 'Rivonia' and comprises an epic poem written in the form of ten separate interlinking dramatic monologues and a critical and reflective commentary. The poem is called 'Rivonia' and it is about the Rivonia Trial at which Nelson Mandela and six co-accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, and about the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The critical and reflective commentary introduces the idea of the epic-minded poet and the sorts of narratives such a poet might look for. It also discusses how the poem came to be written, why the Rivonia Trial was considered a suitable subject for an epic poem, why dramatic monologue was chosen as a suitable form for an epic poem and various problems which arose as a result of this choice. The commentary concludes with a discussion of the way contemporary epic poets use myth in the creation of heroic figures, problems which arise when using contemporary history as a basis for an epic poem and an argument for the continued relevance of epic poetry.

Contents

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Part 1 – 'Rivonia'

Prologue - Izibongo zikaRolihlahla[1]

1.

Letshitshiba! Le-tshi-tshi-ba![2]
Listen to me people! Hear what I have to say!
This is a poem about the elephant of the Thembu
the great bull who knocked down apartheid
He whose tusks gleamed in the sunlight
whose eyes lit up the darkness
He whose bellowing awoke his countrymen
and whose wisdom confounded his enemies.

2.
Who was victorious not by strength of arms
but strength of mind, and steadfast character
He won men and women over by persuasion
and did not let his suffering embitter him
He forgave those who persecuted his family
Such men are rare in the history of the world
because heaven keeps such great souls for itself.

3.
The Land was defiled by a poisonous ideology
The Vaal and the Orange ran brown with hatred
Men lost their trust in the springs of wisdom
Children could not suckle at their mother's breast
In the schools the students burned their books
In the streets, the mob was judge and jury and
the necklace was the enforcer of their anger.

4.
The horizon darkened with clouds of war
Warriors sharpened their spears
The thorn-trees whispered, "There will be blood"
and bowed their heads. The withered veld
cried softly, "There will be blood." In the sky
the vultures gathered. They could smell blood
and the hyenas slunk out of their caves – blood.

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[1] 'Praise poem for Nelson Mandela' – Mandela is addressed by his Thembu given name in accordance with the traditions of Xhosa praise poetry.

[2] Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry,* Second edition, updated and revised, Publications of the Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature, volume 5 (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017),42.

Opland's note on his translation says, '"Letshitshiba"' has no meaning, but is merely a nonce exclamation to attract attention.'

5.
"Wake! Amakósa, wake!" cried Makhanda
"And arm yourselves for war.
As coming winds the forest shake,
I hear a sound from far:
It is not thunder in the sky,
Nor lion's roar upon the hill,
But the voice of HIM who sits on high,
And bids me speak his will!" [3]

6.
Black South Africans sensed Makhanda's cry
just as the South-Easter wafts the smell of the fynbos[4]
far out to sea, and the weary mariner
in his storm-battered ship, scenting the presence
of this fairest of Capes, feels his heart billow
So, they drew the scent of freedom into their nostrils
and their spirits lifted as their heads filled with dreams.

7.
Madiba's trial is the story of my poem
Hear me out listeners. For this is our history
not a re-imagining in Homer's voice, or a tale
from Ovid's pen. Listen, and I will tell you
how he and his companions were sent into hell
and how they returned triumphant, to rescue
their people and birth the Rainbow Nation.

8.
Nor do I ask you to accept my words as truth
for I will summon witnesses, and you shall hear
it from the mouths of brave women and men
who fought against that tyrannous regime
Who endured imprisonment and torture
threats to their children, and every means
of harassment malignancy could devise.

9.
But now I am separated from these events
by huge reaches of time and space
How can I sing of them without help?
Come to me, Angel of Inspiration
Let me be your strings and sound-box
Let me sing of these desperate dreams

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[3] Thomas Pringle from 'Makannas Gathering', in *Ephemerides: or Occasional Poems* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1828).

[4] 'Fynbos' is the name given to a species of indigenous vegetation found on the headlands of the Cape.

of 'These Songs of Freedom.'[5]

10.
For what are we poets but the songs we leave behind?
Our voices drift on the currents of history
like voices in the wind heard by a traveller
who perceives some lost pattern or meaning
But he or she too is overtaken by time, and founders
before the tale can be re-told and interpreted
Yet our songs outlast the mightiest empires.

11.
My story starts at Belém in Lisbon
on the wide banks of the Tagus
where Salazar's[6] white tower, erect
and monstrous rears up from the river bank
and round its brittle loins, like some garland
of its lost potency, a statuary of sailors, men-at-arms
priests, and merchants, with Prince Henry at the prow.

12.
In this harbour, old Zacuto, the cartographer
instructed Da Gama in the science of navigation
Five centuries of European oppression began
when his sturdy caravels moved out to sea
with their steadfast captain carrying his king's writ
to claim for Portugal all the land he discovered
and raise his padrão[7] in the name of God and his sovereign.

13.
Months later, they rounded the Cape of Storms
Then somewhere near Mossel Bay on East Africa's coast
two of the vagrant strands of humanity
separated from each other since time began
came together to hear each other's poetry
As Camões tells it in *The Luciads*:
"The people who owned the country here.…"

14.
"Were cordial and humane…
They came towards us on the sandy beach
With dancing and an air of festival…
They sang pastoral songs in their own
Tongue, sweetly and in harmony,

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[5] The reference is to Bob Marley's *These Songs of Freedom.*

[6] Antonio Salazar, autocrat of Portugal from 1932 to 1968, when Portugal gave up her African colonies.

[7] A padrão was a large stone cross inscribed with the coat of arms of Portugal that was placed as part of a land claim by Portuguese explorers. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padrao accessed on 21/5/2018.

Whether rhymed or in prose we could not gauge
But like the pipes of Virgil's golden age."[8]

15.
Alas, such conviviality could not last
Europe had come to subjugate not celebrate
After the Portuguese came the Dutch
Boer settlers soon established claims
to valleys and pastures never before possessed
and the redoubtable Simon Van der Stel[9]
planted a thorny hedge to keep the k……s out.

16.
Like some huge crustacean come out of the deep ocean
European tentacles spread across the land
The British crushed the pride of the Xhosa
and the fearsome impis of the Zulu
Assegai and shield fell before musket and cannon
Rivers ran red with blood, villages were put to the torch
and their chiefs kissed the Governor-general's boot.

17.
Move on to June 1964. The Republic of South Africa
is now a land that flows with milk and honey
Beneath the trackless veld lies gold
diamonds, platinum, uranium and coal
Mineral wealth enough to enrich a nation
to dam rivers, to build roads and sewers
to construct power stations, to found hospitals.

18.
Money to endow schools and universities
to provide water for the thirsty to drink
and for the traveller to wash the dust
from his weary feet. Water to fill
swimming pools and keep the fairways green
Electricity to light house, farm and factory
and let the rugby stadiums blaze like stars.

19.
But this cornucopia is not for all
If your skin colour is not Snow White's
you do not enter the dining room
If you are a shade of brown, you can crouch
in the corner and feed off leftovers
But if you are a black person, well now!

---

[8] Luís de Camões, *The Lusíads*, Canto V, from stanzas 62 - 63, trans. Landeg White, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[9] First governor of the Cape Colony, the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

Your harness waits for you outside.

20.
Because all of this wealth is built on the sweat
of black men, who toil in the fields and in the mines
At six thirty a.m. in West Driefontein Deep
the first day shift shuffles into a steel cage
that will plunge them three thousand metres
into the bowels of the earth. The tannoy
spews out orders, as the steel gates clang shut.

21.
On that sound they metamorphose
for the purgatory of their shift
they become creatures of the Company
They are hunters of an elusive seam
Cyclopean demons, articulated worms
Their limbs, the jabbering rock drill
the pressure hose, the pickaxe and the shovel.

22.
Can Makhanda's voice reach them here
in the dark intestines of Mother Earth
who bore them to roam the endless veld
and track the stars across the velvet heavens?
But down here they follow a trail long cold
a faint sheen in the granite, a golden lode
she laid in the molten congress of her youth.

23.
This was my adopted State
It took my parents in, and looked after them
It bestowed good things upon my family
It nourished me until my limbs grew strong
It educated me in its traditions and values
Then it put me in uniform and gave me a gun
so that I could fight to defend them.

24.
Here is our house in a pleasant suburb
Our neighbours are all white people
Non-whites cannot own property here
Over there, separated from our house
by a yard, are the servants' quarters
Where non-white people may stay
so long as they are working for us.

25.
A Saturday morning. There's a commotion in the yard
The maid is screaming, her eyes are dark pools and

her doek[10] is off. She is wrapped in a blanket
A tall white policeman stands in the yard
He has a big revolver in a brown holster
Two non-white policemen hold a man
who only has trousers on. He is shaking.

26.
"Madam help me, this is my husband," She pleads
"I have not seen him for six months"
My mother looks embarrassed
and says to the tall policeman
"She did ask me, I said I didn't mind"
"Lady, this k….r doesn't have a pass. Monday
you can come to the Old Fort and pay his fine."

27.
In the Old Synagogue in Pretoria
the trial of Nelson Mandela and his companions
for conspiracy and sabotage is concluding
"These men are enemies of the state!"
the Prosecutor declaims. "Not so, your Honour"
the defendants reply, "For justice, itself
demands we fight the state's unjust laws, and
for this cause, we are willing to sacrifice our lives."[11]

28.
The Judge thought it was high treason
a capital offence against the state
But treason was not the charge
that the Prosecutor had brought
It was sabotage, a lesser offence, that
he sought to prove. And though this crime
was also grave, the death penalty could be waived.

29.
Now listen as I tell you how their lives were spared
How Madiba and his companions were imprisoned
in the old leper colony on barren Robben Island
and how the wardens failed to break their spirit
How Winnie and Albertina kept their names alive
in the hearts of the people, and how their captors
set them free and acknowledged Madiba as leader.

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[10] Head-scarf commonly worn by black South African women.

[11] Pastiche of Nelson Mandela's speech to the court at the Rivonia Trial - 'Nelson Mandela's Speech from the Dock at the Rivonia Trial - April 20th 1964', http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/23/nelsonmandela first accessed 5/5/2015. From now on 'Nelson Mandela's speech from the dock.'

30.
My first witness is gallant Makhanda
Xhosa warrior and prophet, who in April 1819
angered by British raids into Xhosa territory
massed his warriors in the hills above Grahamstown
The Xhosa army attacked in broad daylight
but the British garrison was forewarned
Xhosa assegais were no match for cannon fire
The Kowie River ran red with their blood.

31.
Makhanda surrendered to the British, who imprisoned
him on Robben Island. The Prophet and several
companions broke free. They commandeered
three whaling boats and set off for the mainland
But Makhanda's boat overturned in heavy surf
and he drowned. Those who hear such things say
that in time of need his voice comes to his people.

32.
Then you will hear from the Prosecutor
as he sits at his desk considering his final plea
He has stitched a kaross of lies and flung it
over Madiba and his companions. He knows
that his superiors want Madiba dead
and success in this will bring him glittering prizes
But like Pharaoh's baker, he has had a troubling dream.

33.
Then the Judge. He is up early for dawn.
After the trial he retired to his farm in the Magaliesberg
The authorities did not forget that he let Madiba live
Whispers that he had betrayed the Volk
hissed along the corridors of power
He stepped down as Judge-president of the Transvaal
and devoted his life to caring for his prize Friesians.

34.
And there I am in the washing area
Of the Golden Temple in Amritsar
A guest of the people of Guru Nanak[12]
Unpeeling the first layers of my carapace
stepping out of the armour of apartheid
confronting the false sense of superiority
conferred on me by accident of birth.

---

[12] Guru Nanak – founder of the Sikh religion to whom the Golden Temple at Amritsar in the Northern Punjab is dedicated.

35.
On my right a lad from Birmingham
on my left a beggar from the Deccan
We share a single tap, a water jug
and a bar of soap. Taking it in turns
to douse ourselves. Wincing as the
cold stream sluices the Punjabi dust
from our hair and our weary feet.

36.
Perhaps Makhanda's call reached me there
a continent away, as we smiled and
joked under the beneficent sun
When, alone and sick for home, I paused
a mote in the jet stream of humanity,
and spread my sleeping bag on the floor
with my friends and fellow travellers.

37.
Then you will hear from Drum
whose Nikon eyes and angry pen
helped him chronicle his people's rage
I met him some time after the Soweto riots
when I came back to Johannesburg the Golden[13]
As my flight approached Jan Smuts airport
I watched its diadem of swimming pools
sparkle like gems in the evening light.
.

38.
Far in the distance the haze of cooking fires
over Orlando, Soweto and Sophiatown, where
the minions who served this metropolis lived
That was three years after the cauldrons over-boiled
and the schoolchildren took to the streets
Things had changed. Drum and I were at a party
I held out my hand and got back a cold stare.

39.
To recount the story of the years of darkness
Madiba and his companions spent on Robben Island
I call the Prison Warden. A hostile witness you may say
A tribal man, more likely to make the Prosecutor's case
whose hate-filled father cast him out. But in Madiba
he found a person who did not falter, and a heart
that gave freely and did not demand repayment.

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[13] Jerusalem is referred to as 'The Golden' in Jewish folk lore and popular song. Johannesburg's wealth was built on gold and it was famous for its mine dumps.

40.
The Commie is familiar with the witness box
He was a lawyer himself in his Jo'burg years
a champion of the ANC from his youth
Madiba's law school friend, an energetic defender
of political detainees. Their families came to him
when other doors slammed shut, while his partner
took the glamour cases and looked the other way.

41.
He speaks for all those who stood up
and fought, though their friends were
detained, banned and tortured, or blown apart
as they opened their mail or started their cars
by bombs sent by cowards skulking in BOSS HQ
and for their wives and children who suffered or were
neglected. Because in this struggle, the Cause was everything.

42.
The Prisoner's wife speaks too, of her life
as she waits for her husband to emerge
from the cells that kept him safe for so many years
'Mother of the Nation' is her preferred accolade
She did not weave her husband's father a burial shroud
nor did she refuse the many suitors who swarmed
around her bed, anxious to please their queen.

43.
But she put the name Mandela on the world's lips
'A dangerous woman,'[14] fearless, radical, not to be cowed
by any man. A shaker of the establishment
a hooligan and perhaps a murderess. Cross her
and hands might seize you on a dark corner
They force a tyre over your shoulders. You gag
on petrol fumes. Then comes the swoosh of a match.

44.
Then I call another mother, who also wants her say
equally adamant and fearless. An orator
who inherited a storyteller's skill with words
A deep-rooted baobab, towering and fruitful
content with her husband and her faith
known to all her people as Ma - whose house
was always open to friends and strays in need.

[14]Heading of *The Economist* obituary 5th April 2018. https://www.economist.com/obituary/2018/04/05/winnie-mandela-died-on-april-2nd accessed on 20/6/2018.

45.
Into those dark and troubled times
a man was born whose mind was strong
a man whose faith and courage showed
who did not let his people suffer wrong
It seemed to us that vicious war
would stalk our streets and peaceful farms
and in the orange and the apple groves
cobras would nest and locusts swarm.

46.
He did not falter or shirk his task
or let old hatreds change his path
he gave to us all we could ask
and saved our land from a bloodbath
And so he walked vales of despair
then he returned from hell on earth
He came to us with wisdom rare
and brought the Rainbow Nation to its birth.

Makhanda's Prophecy

At the edge of the breakers,
where the water abruptly turns
from aquamarine to midnight black
as Robben Island dives into the deep
a solitary rock, encrusted with weed
and barnacles and tonsured in green
stands adamant, looking back at Africa.

Look closely, strain your eyes
perhaps you see a man clinging
to its base as the water swirls
around it. Now the flung spray
obscures your view, but there he is
his huge hands cut and bleeding
as they struggle for purchase.

Now you hear his desperate cries
deeper than the crashing waves
louder than the clanging alarm bells
from the high walled prison compound
booming at you from two centuries past
resonating in the reaches of your skull
"Swim my brothers! Swim to freedom!"

Cry out Makhanda! Cry out for liberty!
Let the island hear your voice, Let the world hear it
Your words thunder in the warden's ears
you give heart to the prisoners and courage
to those who struggle against the tyranny of apartheid.

1.
'Hear me, my people
for these may be my last words to you
My companion takes them down
in the language of our oppressors
This skill he learned from the missionaries,
whose teachings slip through your grasp like sand
May my words prove a better shield for you, in time of need'

2.
'The night prepares to flee
and the sun is in our Father's kraal
making itself ready for day
In the kitchen a man breathes life
into the embers of the cooking fire
and in the cell block, my rescuers take
our weapons from their hiding places.'

3.
'Tonight, if God is willing, I breathe free air
and return to you from over the sea
If not, I go into the land of our ancestors
Whatever my fate, I will never leave you
All those who listen will hear my voice
as the traveller hears the sea from far off
and it will bring warmth to your hearts.'

4.
'We of the AmaXhosa are born free
Free to come and go as we please
to circumcise our menfolk in the hills
and to marry the spouses of our choice
Free to herd our cattle where we please
to build our houses where we choose
and to worship the Creator in our own way.'

5.
'Look into your souls
Do they not burn with the fire of stars?
Are we not also creatures of flame
and children of the Eternal One, wearing
the clothes of this world, for but a moment?
We do not die, but cast off our bodies
and step into the world of our ancestors.'

6.
'Neither the Xhosa nor the British rule
this land and all its abundance and we
humans are only one of the many beings
who inhabit it. We are like herd-boys
who mind our families' cattle in the hills
We watch over them while they feed, but when
night falls we must drive them home.'

7.
'All this I knew from my earliest days
when I herded cattle and goats for my uncle
in the fragrant valleys of the Fish River
and stood guard against creatures of the bush
Then, our ancestors would keep me company
and tell me of the mighty deeds of ancient warriors
and the teachings and wisdom of our councillors.'

8.
'Are we not made of the same stuff
as they who oppress us?
Why then do they persecute us?
Why do they steal our cattle and
burn our cornfields so that we starve?

Why are our daughters kidnapped for slaves?
Why is our land taken from us?'

9.
'What evil spirit possesses their King
that he allows his greedy subjects
to come here and do this to us?
Why do they reject the friendly hand we offer
and in his name, trample justice in the dust
Why do their magistrates honour thieves
and reward murderers with favours.'

10.
'When I was young and thirsty for new things
I travelled to Gaika's kraal to meet the missionary
Nyengana[15] and hear the good news with my own ears
We spoke for many hours about the nature
of this new truth. But I could not understand why
if God wanted his son to be born and live
he should also allow him to be killed in that way.'

11.
'Then our ancestors came to me in visions
to help me interpret these teachings for our people.
They promised to appear to me out of the sea, at Gompo
So, I came to that place with many of our people
We killed our cattle, and danced, and entered
the water to purify ourselves. Then we called out to them
but they were silent and did not show themselves.'

12.
'There were those among us who mocked me
and said openly that my prophecies were lies
I preached that we had behaved impiously
that we had not done what was asked of us
that our people were not yet ready
Then God gave us victory over Gaika
And men and women trusted my words.'

13.
'In my manhood many followed me
the ears of the chiefs of our clans
were open to me. My teachings
were respected by all of the AmaXhosa
for they knew that our ancestors
spoke wisdom through me and that
what I prophesied would come to pass.'

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[15] Xhosa name for Dr J.T. Van der Kemp – Isaac Williams Wauchope, *Wauchope*, *Selected Writings, 1874-1916*, ed. and tr. Jeff Opland and Abner Nyamende,(Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2008), 50.

14.
'The Governor sent his commando
into our land to look for stolen cattle
Those men had the eyes of crows
and the hearts of hyenas. They killed
people they had no quarrel with
They burned crops and stole cattle
and they left many clans destitute.'

15.
'I cried out against the injustice
Our leaders heard my words and they
mustered their warriors. We sharpened
our weapons and made plans for battle
By secret ways we came to the hills
above the town, and there we massed
and the clans assembled in their colours.'

16.
'I sent word to their Colonel Wiltshire
that we would join him for breakfast[16]
I hoped they would flee from us
The AmaXhosa are not like the Zulu
The warriors of Chaka and Mzilikaze
spill the blood of woman and children
as though they were rats in grain pots.'

17.
"'Everything will be ready for you on your arrival"
He replied. And so it was
The roar of their cannon stopped our hearts
Their guns tore our regiments into shreds
as the hungry lion rips open its kill
Proud warriors ran from battle like children
still carrying their assegais on their backs.'

18.
'Then Boesak the Khoi, and his hunters joined the British
His marksmen picked off our captains one by one
Proud men fell not knowing who had killed them
I knew then that our ancestors were not with us
so I put an end to slaughter, and called the warriors back
The rock pool where the AmaXhosa gathered, ran red
We named it "Egazini, The Place of Blood."'

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[16] G. E.Cory, *The Rise of South Africa* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), 1: 385.

19.
'For four months they hunted me
I watched them from high koppies
or from my hiding places in the thick bush
They drove my people out of their homes
set fire to fields tended for generations
and shot mothers with babes on their backs
They did not care if we starved or perished.'

20.
'They think themselves civilised men
But they behave like barbarians
Their missionaries teach that greed is a sin
but greed is behind every action they take
Huge rewards were offered for my capture
Yet no-one betrayed me
and I wept for the suffering they inflicted.'

21.
'Yet there were those who said this was my doing
And I did not speak with the voice of our ancestors
"If you give yourself up," they said, "All will be well"
This angered me, for they misunderstood
the devious nature of our persecutors
But if there was a chance to help my people
by my surrender, I could not let it go.'

22.
'So, I walked into their camp, and gave myself up
"Stöckenstrom at least has honour," I thought
He had, but he had no authority
I was treated like an ox which had strayed from the herd
My wives who came with me were sent away
I was bound and handcuffed, as though I was a thief
and a covered wagon took me from my people.'

23.
'There were many among the Boers and the English,
who argued for my fair treatment as a hostage
and were ashamed at the way their countrymen behaved
But not Colonel Wiltshire. He and Governor Somerset
have no regard for our traditions of warfare
They are not interested in a treaty or an alliance
but only in our exploitation and subjugation.'

24.
'And so I, who was once a free man, am here
on this windblown island of sand and scrub

I ask God to care for my wives and my people
Wherever I go, armed men come with me
like thunder clouds they come between me
and my ancestors. The noise of their boots
drowns out the voices that comfort me.'

25.
'The missionary Campbell came to visit me
I am like a wild bull they long to subdue
and lead to pasture, so I may impregnate
my people with the teachings of their Jesus
We spoke of other missionaries, Van der Kemp
the hairless one, and Williams. I said I respected
Jesus more than they, for their real god was greed.'

26.
'He showed me a strange stick you look through
in which you see coloured spirits dancing
that have been captured from the water
and are held there by evil magic
"Give it to me!" I said "that I may release them"
But he laughed and said it was glass and sunlight
and could not be opened by curious men.'[17]

27.
'This is their way, even for their holy men
They try and intimidate you with tricks
and sleight of hand. The way Pharaoh's magicians
tried to intimidate Moses the man of God
with their rods and serpents. They cannot accept
that we of the AmaXhosa have our own prophets
who hear the word of God through our ancestors.'

28.
'For we will not be stilled
and my voice will not be silenced
I am a thirst that cannot be quenched
a flame that cannot be snuffed out
Let them throw armies against you
Let them lock you in the darkest cell
You will still hear my cry.'

29.
'Be courageous, my people, and forgiving
Do not let hatred for your persecutors
or your enemies overcome you
These things destroy peace and curdle

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[17] The missionary John Campbell visited Makhanda on Robben Island in November of 1819 and brought with him a kaleidoscope. As these had only been invented in 1816, it was for its period an extremely hi-tec toy.

a nation's contentment
Listen out for my voice in the winds
that afflict you, for I will always be with you.'

'I must go now.'

The Prosecutor retires to his study

The Prosecutor has retired to his study
to prepare his closing speech. The rush hour
is nearly over. He moves to the window
of his flat in a smart tower on Parktown Ridge
The window is ajar despite the chill Jo'burg winter
The roar of traffic from Jan Smuts Avenue
reminds him of game at a waterhole.

He frowns at the blur over Soweto
where the fumes of thousands of cooking fires
darken the winter sky. Then he runs his finger
across the sill where the house girl left some dust
'These people are unclean,' he mutters.

Then he prepares to pray
as he always does, at this hour
He winds the old leather thongs
of his grandfather's tefillin tight
around his left arm and scarred hand
turns in the direction of Jerusalem
adjusts his tallit, and begins.

1.
'Almighty give me strength to defend
this State against those who defy it
These men deny your presence
and scorn the sanctity of your will
Let me be an apostle of truth
like a prophet of Ancient Israel
Let my voice rage against this darkness.'

2.
'Shine your light on the Afrikaner people
in their struggle against the Philistine
as you did on the Children of Israel
They too flung off Pharaoh's yoke
They too wandered through the desert
Now they are Your shepherds in this land
where enemies attack them from all sides.'

3.
'We battle for our future in this court
where we weigh our arguments on justice's scales
Shall we bow down before the golden calf?
Shall we obey these godless acolytes
and surrender our birth right
to terrorists and communists
or live as free men, under Your mild yoke?'

4.
'Now I set aside my robes of prayer
and take up my pen. The world waits
for me and it shall see the tempered steel
of South African justice. Mandela played
the sentimental card, the noble appeal
to great causes, democracy, equal rights
for all. But I have exposed his falsehoods.'

5.
'Their Counsel was impudent today
He challenged my witness. My poor man
thought it was an attack by the devil
He forgot everything I had told him
he even admitted he was not at the farm
when that scoundrel Mandela was there
Then it was said that I coached the witness.'

6.
'I had to clarify my man's testimony
"Your Honour," I said "the witness is a policeman
a servant of the state. He would not lie
He would not defile the sanctity of a Court
with a conman's treacherous tongue
There is too much disrespect in this court
for those who dutifully serve the people."'

7.
'After Mandela spoke from the stand
the whole gallery stood and cheered
His Honour should have cleared the court
not let him drink deep from that heady cup
That was a bold move of his. To speak out
like Cicero before the Senate, or Mark
Antony before the baying Roman mob.'

8.
'No hunter prepared more thoroughly
than I did for that cross-examination
My nets and snares were set
my blades honed, and the beaters
briefed and ready. But Mandela leapt
from my trap bright as a tiger
He roared and the whole world heard him.'

9.
'I wove new ropes to bind him
I lured him into my chamber
and lulled him with songs and sweet wine
I tied his locks to the beams of my house
and cried out, "The Philistine is upon you"

But he shook out his tresses
and snapped his bonds like thread.'

10.
"'Give us our freedom," he cried
"You oppress us with your laws
Your rod falls heavily on our backs
We plough your fields and slave
in your mines, we sweat in your mills
and factories in return for the gleanings
and the scraps from your tables.'"

11.
'But his people are children. Fledglings
on a branch clamouring for food
their new feathers are yet untested
Shall we neglect our nest, and leave them
to the fangs of the boomslang?
Shall we shake the tree until they fall
squawking into the jaws of the meerkat?'

12.
'Providence has given us the guidance
of this ship and it is our destiny to sail it
The crew may not question the captain
It is their duty to obey his orders
It is God's decree that this people be a light
to the nations, a beacon of truth
to shine upon this heart of darkness.'

13.
'Mandela and his crew admit
they seek to overthrow the state
They have gathered weapons and explosives
and are trained to use them by our enemies
They say they do not seek to take life
or harm the innocent, but this is lip service
No cause is greater than the rule of law.'

14.
'The state has a duty to uphold the law
and I am an officer of the state, charged
to enforce its will. To punish those who
by their treasonous actions undermine
the foundations of our peace and unity
Their punishment must be as thunderous
as the broadside of a battleship.'

15.
'False prophets must die by stoning[18]
because they cheat people of the truth
The coinage they offer is counterfeit
Their flypaper words trap the unwary
People are foolish, they fall for his lies
like crocuses blooming before the spring
or trout rising to the angler's lure.'

16.
'And yet, and yet, what is it that he seeks?
"A free society, in which all people live
together in harmony."[19] Those words of his
seemed to come out of some deep chasm
As though the earth itself sang out
some melody that I had long forgotten
whose chords strike tremors in my soul.'

17.
'Merciful God! Why does my chest constrict
as if it was bound with hoops of iron?
My hand shakes, and I recoil from my duty
as from a puff adder or a scorpion
A voice out of Egypt roars in my head
loud and clear as a mountain torrent
"Let my people go! Let my people go!"'

18.
'This is madness! I am the attorney-general
the prosecutor in this case, an eminent
lawyer, but above all a rational man
I will not let these wild thoughts deflect
me from my duty. The world watches us
and it shall see that we are resolute
Let them hang, and ask God for mercy.'

19.
'But surely we are the agents of mercy
If we men of faith strain to be merciful
what rain can fall on this fragile land?
The salt winds will blow and the desert
drive back the green fields. The crops
will fail and where the sweet meadow
blossomed, the hyenas will stalk.'

20.
'Without mercy, we become the thing we hate

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[18] Deuteronomy XIII.

[19] Nelson Mandela's Speech from the Dock.

A wolf that devours its children
A tyrant who preserves himself by terror
We put our trust in financiers and generals
Our enemies encircle us we cannot find peace
for Shalom can only come from God.'

21.
"'Be that light unto the nations,"[20] she said
when she came to plead for her husband[21]
"Give him bail," she said. "Let him go, man
of the Sanhedrin. It is within your power
He is not a saboteur, he has not killed
He is a good man who cares for his children
Prison sucks the life from him like a sponge.'"

22.
'But crafty as a jackal, I refused her plea
Though I knew he was not a saboteur
It is his eloquent tongue and clever pen
that condemn him in my master's eyes
They are not ones to let the niceties
of the law come between them
and those they desire should suffer.'

23.
'By this I prove my loyalty to the white tribe
That hound-like I pursue my own people
I claw their eyes and tear their flesh
so my masters can gloat that they
are undone by one of their own
"Is your conscience clear?" she asked
and wept as she left my chambers.'

24.
'Why should it not be? I observe the law
I keep the Shabbat, I perform the mitzvot
By what right does this tearful apostate
cross-examine me on my conscience
But her question burned me in my core
My finger stumps throb and burn
as though the wounds were still fresh.'

25.
'Ah, my fingers! In the pit of the night
they point at me. Shouting and accusing
My dreams drag me back to my father's butcher shop
a brash young fool playing the fool

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[20] Isaiah 42:6.

[21] See Hilda Bernstein, *The World That Was Ours: The Story of the Rivonia Trial* (London: SAWriters, 1989), 135.

sneaking into the shop during Shabbat
breaking the Law and shaming my parents
just because I wanted to go to the movies.'

26.
'The massive fridge door stuck
and then groaned painfully
as I heaved it open. Warning enough
for a brash boy who disobeyed the Law
I had thirty pounds of choice steak to mince
and ten chickens to pluck and kosher
a big order for a fancy barmitzvah.'

27.
'Cracked white tiles ooze filth
The old mincer snarls in its corner
I am bound on the chopping block
My gown is in tatters and my papers
strewn about me. Then my hand
is in the mincer, my arm is on fire
and there is blood, blood, blood.'

28.
'The sheets are wet with my sweat
I run to the bathroom and vomit
I stare at my ruined finger stubs
My hand throbs like an engine
The scars are puckered and livid
"Darling?" my wife calls from the bedroom
"Something I ate at lunch," I somehow reply.'

29.
'My father lost that order and much else
He was waiting for me with his strap
when they let me out of Groote Schuur
"Your fingers are your punishment from God,"
He said, as his arm rose. "This is from me"
I was changed after that, I knew my direction
It was the Law of God and the law of the land.'

30.
"'Thou shalt not kill!" That is written
and all Israel stood there to witness it[22]
If I stain my hands with their blood
my soul will answer for it some day
And who will plead for me before His throne?
"Better for a thousand guilty to live," so the

[22] In the Old Testament 'Israel' is used for the Jewish nation. According to Talmudic sources, the souls of all of Israel were present at Mount Sanai when Moses read out the Ten Commandments.

Rambam[23] said, "than for one innocent to die.'"

31.
'And where is the evidence that they killed?
They plotted, yes, but they only disrupted
They destroyed things and endangered lives
but they did not take life. The Platteland
clamours for the gallows and my masters
God-fearing men that they are, give way
like a pack of jackals before the pride.'

32.
'Yet the righteous State tried and hung
the little clerk,[24] who killed no-one
but assiduously carried out his orders
The backroom fixer who ran the railways
told the lies, took the bribes, kept the books
and distributed the festering booty
to his ravenous, murdering masters.'

33.
'Now I know that we serve the same masters
the little clerk and I - he willingly, I
out of ambition. And I must do their
bidding whatever the cost to me
I have plunged into wild waters
that carry me far from the shore
Only the current can bear me back.'

34.
'Swim out of the window then!
Let the sweet wind caress my face
the song of angels ring in my ears
the city spread out beneath my arms
One moment of exhilaration
as I reach up for my Maker
then oblivion and the long night.'

35.
'No, I cannot! A hand is uplifted
Something bars the way
What now? What is my course?
I must swim for land or drown
like that old skelm on the Island
That Makhanda, who gave the British hell

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[23] Moses Maimonides the 13th Century rabbi, doctor and scholar.

[24] Adolph Eichmann, who the Israelis tried, found guilty and executed, even though capital punishment was forbidden in the Israeli state. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Rev. and enl. ed, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1994).

then gave himself up, for peace.'

36.
'The noble fool! Did he think the British
would welcome him like a prodigal?
Honour and fair-play are not for savages
They only apply to gentlemen schooled
on the playing fields of Eton and Harrow
He learned the truth soon enough
They shut him away on Robben Island.'

37.
'Martyrdom!
Mandela would welcome it
Death is a stage he would gladly step onto
with Winnie in black as his weeping widow
That's a sting that would poison the Platteland
It would swell up and burst like a rotten fig
and spill its bile across the country.'

38.
'His people will flock to her banner
like the slaves did to Spartacus
What slaughter came with that revolt!
Mayhem will descend on our land
The Vaal will run red with blood
The air will fill with the cry of crows
and crucifixes will line the boulevards'[25]

39.
'Die swaart gevaar
Hellish vision foretold and anticipated
that is too great a price to pay
For the death of any man
and I, a Jew, the instrument of his destruction
his blood on my hands
his death at our door.'

40.
'Dark Angel I beg you
hear our supplications
pass over our houses
We have daubed our lintels
with the blood of a lamb
We are of the chosen people

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[25] According to the Roman historian Appian, Crassus - the Praetor responsible for suppressing the revolt - crucified 6,000 survivors along the road from Capua to Rome. Appian, 'The Civil Wars' in *The Principal Ancient Sources on Spartacus*, Wiley Online Library, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470776605.oth1/pdf accessed on 3-4-2016.

It is others you seek not us.'[26]

41.
'If he must live that we may live
let him end his days on Robben Island
They know how to deal with his sort there
He can set up a podium in his cell
and make the lime quarry his auditorium
He can listen for the voice of Makhanda
if he can hear it over the surf and the gulls.'

42.
'What would freedom mean to him
BOSS[27] would hunt him down like a rat
He would never spend a night in peace
Or he'd end up in a ditch with
twenty trenched gashes in his head
A prison cell is refuge for such a man
a harbour from the storms of open life.'

43.
'He will sleep such a sleep there
that his name will become a myth
People will say, "Once there was a hero
a man who could lead us from this hell
who knew the way to the promised land
but he was taken from us
and borne away across the water."'

44.
'He will return some day
When the nations turn their faces
from us and drive us from the fold
when we grow weary of wandering
after forty years in the desert
and cry out to our leaders, "We are done
with hating! It is time for us to change!"'

45.

'I must go to His Honour, Justice de Wet
He brooks no interference in his court
I can ask and try to persuade
but only he can decide their fate
The future of our nation is in his hands
Seldom has a judge been so alone
or had such need to confront the pack.'

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[26] Exodus 12:17 -23.

[27] Acronym used for the feared Bureau of State Security.

46.
'His father was a lawyer and a mensch
one acquainted with the need to compromise
He rode with the Boers against the British
but when war ended chose to serve the Crown
and yet remained at ease with his countrymen
a bulwark of his tribe, who kept the faith
by respecting men and women of other faiths.'

47.
'De Wet is not a man who likes the rope
They say he put his black cap on just once
for the rape and murder of an innocent girl
The state may justly take the life of those who take life
but must show mercy to those who merely oppose its rule
Mandela's speech may well have tipped the scale
Please God, let my arguments fall on fertile soil.'

Glossary

boomslang – venomous tree snake.

daven – to pray.

Eretz Yisrael – the land and people of Israel in the biblical sense.

Groote Schuur – the main public hospital of Cape Town where Yutar grew up.

meerkat – small Southern African carnivore.

mensch – Yiddish, meaning a person of integrity and honour.

mitzvot – the commandments relating to Jewish observance and religious practice.

Platteland – literally flat lands; South African term referring to the rural countryside but used to describe conservative Afrikanerdom.

Rambam (The) – Moses Maimonides, the great fourteenth century rabbi, scholar and philosopher.

shalom – directly translated as peace but the meaning includes harmony and well-being.

skelm – ruffian or scoundrel.

sangoma – a wise man or woman, sometimes a prophet or seer.

tallit – praying shawl.

tefillin – leather phylacteries put on the arm and head by religious Jews when they pray.

In the Judge's Chambers

Stand below the Amphitheatre[28]
You are reduced to an ant. No, less
A microbe, if time is accounted for
in the eternal ledger of our Maker
Your soul is drenched with water music
as, drawing into itself countless rills
and streams, the Tugela leaps for the sea
Follow its path down through the hills
The houses and farms become smaller
and smaller, the grazing herds disappear
the green hills blur, and vanish into a haze
Far below you other tributaries join it
The Buffalo, the Klip, the Mooi and the Blood
The land seems so verdant from these heights
so still and fertile, so full of peace.

And the river is so full of memory
for water gathers memory to itself
along with the grains of soil it carries
from the mountains to the sea
The history of this Land and its inhabitants
is held fast in its aqueous embrace
And you are in the current, you are tumbled
through rapids below frowning cliff faces
You drift languidly through pleasant pastures
The icy winters freeze and crack you
The veld fires scorch you to the bone
Go to Tugela Mouth, teller of tales
and drink deep. For there are your stories.

See that wiry man crouched over a fire
He grinds ochre and charcoal for paint
and sings a hunting song to himself
as he sketches an outline on the rock face
Long after the last of his tribe is hunted down
his wife raped and his sons enslaved, men will
come to his cave and marvel at his running Eland.[29]

The Judge is in his chambers, pleadings have closed
and it is time for him to deliver his sentence
The fate of Mandela and the other defendants
is in his hands. He knows what the Volk expect of him

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[28] A spectacular cliff face in the Northern Drakensberg, KwaZulu (formerly Natal), source of the Tugela river and two other major rivers, the Orange and the Vaal.

[29] Eland are large antelope which were sacred to the San people.

but he is uncomfortable. There is a knock
on his door. The Prosecutor enters.

1.
'You greatly surprise me, Mr Prosecutor
I have been listening to you for months
As you have stood before me and declaimed
waving your arms around like Cicero
You have not missed an opportunity
to portray the accused as a grave threat
to the safety and stability of our fatherland.'

2.
'I thought to hear you howl for their death
like the crowd at the Coliseum. Your duty
Mr Prosecutor is clear. Law and order
should be at the forefront of your mind
Yet here you are talking in riddles
reminding me of Christ before Pontius Pilate
Has some jackal bitten you? Are you now mad?'

3.
'I have heard you are a religious man
who observes the detail of the Sabbath
as familiar with God's law as the state's
You'll find I know my bible as well as any man
A learned doctor you may be
but you shall not tutor me in my court
You Jews have no monopoly on truth here.'

4.
'We both come, as you rightly say, from people
who love justice and fear the Lord
But those who love justice must uphold the law
These are dangerous men. They are men of ideas
Men who inspire. For them the end justifies the means
This Mandela draws others into a maelstrom
a violent whirlpool that will suck us all under.'

5.
'I am the dutiful son of a great father
and I uphold the ideals that he stood for
He fought for the Afrikaner, for the Volk
He rode with Louis Botha against the British
but then he studied at Cambridge
He did not surrender to hatred
as many in this country have done.'

6.
'My father respected the British Empire
he knew who was ruler and who the ruled

The Boers lost that war, but they won the peace
There is place in this land for all its people
for the Boers, the British, and the Bantu
but Mandela's men forget their place
They oppose the order God has ordained.'

7.
'My family goes back a long way in this land
We are not newcomers, not jetsam like you
refugees from the ghettoes of Europe
My mother's grandfather was a trekboer
he came North with Trichardt and Potgieter
Hendrik Scheepers was leader of his family
four hundred head of cattle and five wagons.'

8.
'He was a man of substance for those times
but sorrow was never far from his door
He was out hunting in the Zoutpansberg
With his eldest son. Tracking an eland
the boy went too close to a cliff
and its treacherous lip gave way
pitching him headlong into the void.'

9.
'Hendrik heard the boy's agonised cries
He crawled to the edge and saw him
pinioned on a ledge eighty feet down
his right leg twisted beneath him
They had no rope but Hendrik tossed
down a water bottle and they prayed
After an hour the vultures came.'

10.
'Hendrik said they looked like priests
Strutting round the boy nodding
their bald heads waiting, waiting
He shot three but soon the sky
filled with wheeling shadows
His son lay on an altar out of reach
no angel came. No ram, caught in a thicket.'

11.
'"Kill me, Pa," the boy said. "Don't let them have me."
And Hendrik, who never missed his mark
shook as he pulled the trigger
Then he rode away like a madman
He couldn't speak until the Dominee
put his hands on him and called out
in God's name, as they wept together.'

12.
'Yes, we Afrikaners have bled for this land
and we also know concentration camps
We starved in Bethulie and Aliwal North and
in Barberton they smote us with dysentery and typhoid
After the Boers surrendered, my father found
his twin sister in 'Irene',[30] starved and delirious
The wind blew her from his arms.'

13.
'It has not escaped me, Mr Prosecutor
that although my court is filled with men
of your faith, in the dock and before the bar
you seem uncomfortable among them
I sense a hostility beyond the usual rivalry
You act like a hound on the spoor of lion
or a swimmer struggling in a current.'

14.
'You appeared before me five years ago
prosecuting a murder case. The accused
had beaten his wife savagely. The woman
came to Johannesburg to find
her husband who had lost his way
You, as I recall, argued firmly for death
That Indian, Mahomed,[31] was for the defendant.'

15.
'The man wept. He had loved his wife and
he hadn't meant to lose his temper
He was with a lover when she burst in
and the shame of the truths she told him
were too destructive of his dignity to bear
Such is the nature of this state. Our pass laws
wrench apart those who God has joined together.'

16.
'Mahomed reminded us that life is sacred
in all our religions. "The state," he said
"Has a duty to preserve the lives of its people
not to destroy them. The deliberate annihilation
of life, is in itself a crime against humanity
By this long delayed and irreversible act
we usurp the power of our Creator."'

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[30] 'Irene' – Notorious concentration camp of the Anglo Boer war where many Afrikaner women and children starved or died of disease.

[31] Ismail Mahomed, a contemporary of Nelson Mandela, who was admitted to the Johannesburg Bar in 1957. He became Chief Justice in 1996 and was always a leading abolitionist. The case is imagined, but not untypical of incidents that occurred during the apartheid regime when capital punishment was common.

17.
"'Redemption is always possible
however heinous the crime. If the state
takes the life of those in its care
then the dignity of the human is denied
and all other rights are undermined. Clemency,"
Mahomed said, "is a sweet fountain of wisdom
from which Judges should drink often.'"

18.
'But you were unpersuaded, Prosecutor
"Crocodile tears!" you responded. "The defendant
feels more sorry for himself, than his victim
and his children, Your Honour," you said
"May I remind you that although not mandatory
the death sentence is intended by Parliament
as a deterrent to protect the weak from violence.'"

19.
"'With the greatest respect, Your Honour
If you allow yourself to be swayed by theatrics
you send a signal to every thug and robber
that they can thwart the law and escape justice
I urge you to eschew my opponent's vague
and lofty sentiments and be pragmatic
This crime demands the ultimate penalty.'"

20.
'With cut and thrust the arguments raged
as you fought like Hector and Achilles
while I looked down from the battlements
Then I stopped you, and gave him fifteen years
He wrote to me last year from Victor Verster[32]
To thank me, and to say that his mother-in-law
Had visited and brought his teenage son.'

21.
'You say these men are communists
That's as may be, but in my court
they will get the justice their Russian friends
would not give them. In Stalin's country
they know how to deal with bush fires
Sabotage and treason get a swift bullet
that strikes a sinner like Jove's thunderbolt.'

22.
'But we Afrikaners believe in the law

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[32] Low risk corrective prison facility where Nelson Mandela spent the last years of his imprisonment.

the tablets from the holy mountain
before which we bend our knee
The word which holds everyone equal
is the central pillar of our temple
which this blind Mandela and his
motley band plot to pull down.'

23.
'What is all this talk from you of martyrdom?
These men are communists and atheists
They do not believe in heaven or hell
They want to blow up buildings
and they don't care if people die
Like piccaninns,[33] they throw stones
and are surprised when windows break.'

24.
'And yet, as you say, there is something
substantial about their manner
They are not my usual fare of thugs
gangsters, racketeers, shebeen queens
and murderers. They have a dignity
about them. A certainty of purpose
like men going about God's business.'

25.
'I have listened to them all carefully
particularly to this man Mandela
You thought you'd scourge him
when he came to the witness box
I saw your eyes gleam as you shuffled
your papers. But your whetted blade
was wasted. Your prey tricked you.'

26.
'He showed himself a statesman
fit to govern our complicated nation
The evidence suggests they took care
in their acts of sabotage to avoid
harming people. Yet so strong
is his conviction, he would sacrifice
his own life for his cause.'

27.
'You gave him a podium, Prosecutor
and he mounted it. The court fell silent
like the congregation on Good Friday
when the Bishop comes to the pulpit

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[33] Term for a black African child (now derogatory).

Seldom have I heard such a sermon
or such eloquence and self-confidence
He is a prince of his people, an oak of the forest.'

28.
'My grandfather on my father's side
Johannes Jacobus de Wet, Oupa Jan
loved wood. His father made ox-wagons
that were renowned throughout the land
All the Trekboers came to his workshop
in Paarl, to place their orders. Pretorius
Trichardt, even Hendrik Potgieter.'

29.
'In his youth Oupa Jan was sent
into the forests to learn the ways
of wood from the woodcutters
Which trees would serve man well
Tough knobthorn for the disselbooms
lemonwood for the felloes and brake shoes
wild olive for the jukskei.'

30.
'Then, despite warnings, he journeyed
to the Dargle valley, to the primeval forest
to seek out yellowwood and stinkwood
for the fine furniture he loved to make
Something happened to him in there
which turned his head. He vanished
After a month they gave him up for dead.'

31.
'Three months later he walked into camp
as if he had been gone five minutes
He couldn't say where he had been
or how he had lived in the forest
He would just smile and look back
right through you in a strange way
People thought he had second sight.'

32.
'He used to put me on his knee
and tell me stories with the same ending
"Kleintjie," he would say. "A shoot
from the stump of Jesse will come before you
and you must know him for who he is
Trust in God, and choose the righteous path
for the fate of our people is in your hands."'

33.
'I too went to the Dargle after Stellenbosch

It is a strange and wild place
There are hidden valleys where
the footsteps of man are unknown
Where you can believe God still walks
in the cool of the evening
mourning the loss of Adam and Eve.'

34.
'Have you been into the forest Prosecutor?
I doubt it. You are a man of the city
not a son of the veld and the vlei
You do not know the strangeness
of it, or the delicacy, or the fear
of its hostility, that grips your throat
freezes your limbs, and blanks your mind.'

35.
'The further I got from the road
the more confidence drained from me
The forest drew a curtain of fern and thicket
behind me and hid my path from me
I pressed on through groves of stinkwood
lianas hung thick from ancient trees
festooned with gaudy forest orchids.'

36.
'As I climbed the ground grew boggy underfoot
I crossed many streams. Some of crystal
rushing down from the escarpment
Others whose course was clogged
with roots and debris or shattered scree
through which the water oozed
like blood from a deep wound.'

37.
'My head throbbed to the cricket's song
my hands were raw, I gasped for breath
It was evening when I found the path
It wound along the base of a cliff
and led me to a sheltered valley
At the far end, a grove of wild figs
and the welcoming mouth of a cave'

38.
'Rock of ages cleft for me
Mother Earth opens herself to us
and we return to her embrace
in the hour of our weakness and our need
Near the entrance was an ancient hearth
I gathered brushwood for a fire
laid out my bedding and slept deep.'

39.
'I woke late and explored my shelter
How long had humans come here?
What stories were told, what dances danced?
The painter's art had captured them. The walls
fervent with hunters, dancers and antelope
In the centre a great eland presided. Beneath
on the floor, a shattered watch engraved "J. J. de Wet."'

40.
'Thank you for coming to see me, Mr Prosecutor
You have reminded me of words I had long forgotten
"I have set before you, life and death
blessing and cursing; therefore choose life
that both thou and thy seed may live"[34]
The way I must take is now clear to me
I shall drink from the cup of clemency.'

41.
'The lives of the defendants are in my hands
but their blood shall not stain them
The State shall have their freedom
more than this I cannot do. I am no prophet
to foresee the path ordained for them
they must make their own choices, I have made mine
I shall stand before my Maker with my head held high.'

[34] Deuteronomy 30:19 KJV

Drum
(for Bantu Stephen Biko)

She bent to bathe my baby brother
Her arms, dark chocolate from wrist
to elbow, were slender and purposeful
A bar of Lux winked at me
from the delicate fudge of her palms
I knew her as Norah or Ruth or Lucy
but never by her true, her birth name.

Uriel's flaming sword separated us
The Immorality Act, pillar of the State
There to protect the young baas
from the dark seductress of his dreams
And should he transgress and trip
justice will smile and rap his knuckles
but her eyes will be put out

"I have one great fear in my heart
that one day when they are turned
to loving they will find we are turned
to hating."[35] *What are the essentials*
of friendship; trust, respect, equality
I met Drum at one of those parties
and thought, "Perhaps we can be friends."

1.
'White boy, don't put your hand out to me
I don't need your friendship
Wat soek jy met my?[36] We are
damp kindling that no spark can ignite
We can't go out drinking together, and what
would your Ma say if you brought me home?
Where the hell would I go to pee?'

2.
'You want to know
what it is like to be black in this country?
You can't imagine it, can you?
But I can tell you, what it is like to be white
You guys live like the gods on Mount Olympus
You hold the lives of black men and women
in your avaricious grasp.'

---

[35] Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. (1948), 1987 ed. (London: Vintage, 2002), 38.

[36] 'What do you want with me?'

3.
'Let me tell you what whiteness is about?
It is all manner of horrible things
that I don't want to have acquaintance with
Dandruff is white, maggots are white
pus is white, leprosy is white, tumours are white
but this is a black man's country
Be strong, be proud, be black.'

4.
'I work for Drum
we beat to the township rhythm
the gangsters, the cops, the jazz, the booze
shebeen queens, sirens, cheesecakes, news
I know Nat and Bessie and Henry and Con
We talk fast and live cool as the breeze
Drum is a magazine with a black philosophy.'

5.
'Man, why should I call you baas?
I don't take orders from you
in your sandals, tee-shirt and jeans
I wear a suit to work like a professional
I can beat you on the tennis court
the soccer pitch or in the classroom
You white liberals are all hot air.'

6.
'The white robes your priests dress up in
the big temples where you pray
the pillars of reason your scholars hide behind
Man, they are darker than a backstreet shebeen
You can learn more about living, friendship
and loving on a night out in Soweto
than you can in three years at Wits or Tukkies.'[37]

7.
'You guys think you are the chosen people
Don't shake your head at me
I can see it in your eyes and lips
in the offer of your hand
and the confident way you stand
But you are as deluded as the Boers
who claim this land in God's name.'

8.
'God is too smart to make such promises

---

[37] 'Wits' (pronounced 'Vitz') - is the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. 'Tukkies' is the University of Pretoria. Both were for white students only.

She knows they only cause strife
among her many children
These expectations carry the Devil's stink
as he goes about fouling up God's creation
and causing trouble for the good creatures
on this beautiful Earth of ours.'

9.
'Hey, what's the strongest thing in the universe?
You white men have spent millions of dollars
you should have spent educating us
to discover that it's a black hole!
It gobbles up stars like breakfast cereal
Yum! Yum! Yum!
Let's have some more of those.'

10.
'Didn't Verwoerd say, "'It is of no avail
for a Bantu to receive a European education?"
You were all deaf and blind to our hunger
for the good things you kept from us
for Homer and Plato, for Newton
and Einstein, for Isaiah and Jesus
for Keynes, for Marx and for Lenin.'

11.
'Now Mr Mandela went to Fort Hare[38]
where he learned many useful things
like how to distinguish law from justice
Justice is a white man's promise
that is never kept. And law?
Law is a confidence trick white men use
to steal from people who are black.'

12.
'Mandela became a smart lawyer
On the run for eighteen months
The black pimpernel. Working in Rivonia
right under the noses of the Security Branch
It was the CIA who tipped them off
He was keeping J Edgar Hoover awake
butting into his vanilla ice dreams.'

13.
'Remember Lilliesleaf Farm, July 63?
That white laundry van that eased up the drive

[38] Fort Hare was a key institution in higher education for black South-Africans.

was a Trojan horse full of blackguards
At the given signal they leapt out
surrounded the farmhouse, banged on the door
"Open up, maak oop, in the name of the law!
It's the Security Branch come to save our land.'"

14.
'In the farmhouse with no thought of danger
our brave men met to plan a new future
In "a beautiful land where a man's skin
meant nothing compared to what lay within"[39]
Where this country would be shared by all
where black and white hands would not form fists
but open to each other in love and friendship.'

15.
'What a catch for the Security Branch
all those big fish flopping about in one net
They were flung into cells, gasping and struggling
In there, alone in the dark, your troubles begin
the jailers gloat over your flesh while
the interrogators put hooks in your mind
A person can drown, in there.'

16.
'Man, how those politicians boasted
The Minister of Justice was like a pig in mud
"There will be a trial of South African justice
The world will know us for what we are
the preservers of Christian moral values
They don't understand what is at stake here
This is just the thin end of the wedge.'"

17.
'The world did indeed watch the trial
and the world saw them for what they were
"Verwoerd, Vorster en Kie"[40] purveyors of lies
to the general public; specialising in oppression
corruption and distortion. It was a great stage
to perform on, the greatest show in town
and we black people played our part.'

18.
'Our apostles were Joffe and Braam Fisher
There was a Judas; Yutar the prosecutor

---

[39] My own loose translation of the opening lines of Antjie Krog's poem 'My Mooi Land' which reads "Kyk ek bou vir my 'n land waar 'n vel niks tel nie, net jou verstand". From Anthea Garman, *Antjie Krog and the Post-Apartheid Public Sphere: Speaking Poetry to Power* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 29.

[40] 'En kie' is Afrikaans for '& Co'. Hendrik Verwoerd was Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster Minister of Justice.

Justice De Wet hunched over his papers
peered at us through lenses an inch thick
as though we were the sea monsters
come to cause trouble in his land
The cops were everywhere like a plague of rats.'

19.
'But Winnie shimmered as she sailed
up the steps of the Old Synagogue[41]
She was my jacobin Venus
The crowds parted before her and
the press snapped madly at her heels
Even the cops were awed by her presence
She was black, beautiful and ours.'

20.
'Albertina came to watch over her Walter
Bustling in as though the court was her hospital ward
Each day brought a new spectacle or drama
Witnesses intimidated or broken by beatings
policemen lying and bringing false evidence
traitors betraying their comrades
and the hyena press howling for blood.'

21.
'Then the lion outwitted his hunter
Mandela exercised his right to speak
Yutar squeaked and waved his arms in protest
"Your Honour, Your Honour!"
but defence Counsel had him by the balls
He was white chalk on a blackboard
as a black man roared from the witness box.'

22.
'I don't remember exactly what he said
he just told the court and the world
how black people are cheated out of
this land which is theirs
how white men and women enslave us
how we suffer in the mines, and on farms
and in the cities we built for them.'

23.
'Blow after blow he landed
rights and lefts like Ali fighting Liston
"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"

---

[41] The Transvaal Supreme Court sat in an old synagogue acquired by the government in 1950 https://jewishphotolibrary.smugmug.com/AFRICA/AFRICASouth/SOUTHAFRICA/Gauteng/ZAPretoriaPaulKrugerSynagogue/ accessed on 1/10/2016.

He gathered all our stories together
into a raging history of our struggle
the way the Tugela gathers unto itself
streams and tributaries on its way to the sea.'

24.
'When he said "It is a cause I could die for"[42]
my heart jumped and my eyes were wet
A deep silence fell on the court
even the judge looked thoughtful
His words broke over me and tumbled me
onto a new shore. I was reborn a man
and I knew I could die for this man.'

25.
'Yutar got his chance to cross-examine
but Sisulu made chicken-shit of him
and the others were firm and resolute
Black and white stood shoulder to shoulder
they were fearless in the face of the charges
They did not disgrace themselves
the future held no terrors for them.'

26.
'We thought it would be death
The apartheid state demanded it
Mandela had torn down the pillars of its temple
and he must be crushed in its ruin
There was a rumour that the US ambassador
had been to see the Prime Minister
Hey, what did the Afrikaners care?'

27.
'But the judge did not dare give us martyrs
Not him, he and Yutar were too smart
to start a veld fire near the farmhouse
The whole country would have gone up
Life, the living death, was what they got
He thought to quench their flame
in the seas that swirl around Robben Island.'

28.
'After that the great famine began for us
The fields the ANC had sown became barren
the blossom withered on the branches and
the cattle we cherished died of thirst
In the market place men fought for bread
and women became frigid and spiteful

---

[42] 'Nelson Mandela's Speech from the Dock.'

Heaven stopped its ears to our prayers.'

29.
So when John Harris[43] threw a stone into the hive
When Jo'burg station burst into red and gold
he gave us a sweet honeycomb that dripped
succour into our famished mouths
I don't believe in killing but when I saw
Queen Balthazar[44] buzzing with fury
I loved that man Harris like a brother.'

30.
'It was Winnie who stepped into the silence
Man that woman was ring smart
the SB harried her, but she gave them hell
and Albertina was our rock of ages
She was stern as a matron on her ward round
Our orphaned nation was in her care and
she comforted us in our time of trouble.'

31.
'But where were you man, when Soweto burst
its banks? When the dusty streets heaved
and churned. When the kids sang 'Nkosi sikilel' iAfrica'
and chucked stones at the Bedfords and Hippos[45]
with only dustbin lids as shields. Where were you
when the anger raged and the tear gas swirled
and then pop – pop, and Hector Pieterson[46] fell?'

32.
'You were long gone to your haven
You built a new life for yourself
in your North Sea Jerusalem
Your snout was deep in your law books
No problems for you, no border controls
holding camps, or appeals for asylum
with your dark blue passport and white skin.'

33.
'We thought you Witsies would stand by us
but you were all clever talk and empty promises'
You vanished at the first sniff of powder
back to the Northern suburbs, to Parktown

---

[43] John Harris, a white activist, set off a petrol bomb in Johannesburg station on 24th July 1964.

[44] Balthazar John Vorster; then Minister of Justice, later Prime Minister.

[45] Armoured personnel carriers used by the South African Police and Army.

[46] Hector Pieterson, aged 13, was one of the first children to die in the 1976 Soweto riots https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HectorPieterson accessed on 16/10/16.

to Saxonwold, to Melrose, to the Wanderers Club
to your tennis courts, your bowling greens
your fairways. And you shut the gates, clang.'

34.
'Anyway, a stack of you liberals were Commies
"It's not racism," you argued, "it's worker exploitation
simple as that. Don't feel bad about being black
big capital needs a workforce to exploit."
So why don't working class white men carry a pass?
Why don't they send their wives and children
back to the plaas[47] to scratch a living in the dirt?'

35.
'I am a Xhosa, my wife is Shangaan
Though I live in the city and dress
like a white man, I remember where
my father and mother lie buried
We are proud people with many traditions
who took their living from land and river
We will not be dismissed by marxist jargon.'

36.
'Once they stopped me
"Are you that smart k….r who writes for Drum?
Pasop jong![48] We've got our eye on you."
And they took my Nikon, my precious eye
Put it under the Hippo's black ribbed tyre
and reversed. I sat in the dust and wept
but I was lucky that day.'

37.
'Satan and his demons could take lessons
from Rooi Rus Swanepoel[49]
Have you ever seen a man or woman
when he has finished with them?
Something of their soul goes missing
like a cup of porcelain that has been dropped
then glued back together, badly.'

38.
'Ah Biko, you too were ripped from our arms
your sweet head dashed against rocks

---

[47] Afrikaans for farm.

[48] 'Pasop' is Afrikaans for 'Watch Out!' and 'jong' is boy, very frequently used in South Africa as a derogatory term of address.

[49] Lieutenant Theunis Swanepoel was one of the most notorious torturers of the Security Branch https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv03445/04lv03519/05lv03668.htm accessed on 18/10/16.

your eloquent tongue torn out
In the darkness that smothered us
your sweet song gave us breath
your rhythms set us dancing, your defiance
gave us hope, your words gave us power.'

39.
'In our madness we devoured each other
Even Winnie was blighted
her bright crown tarnished
her bed a lair of wolves
her lips smeared with Stompie's[50] blood
and in the dark chapels of our streets
black necklaced bodies burned.'

40.
'Makhanda's voice kept hope alive
Our prophet did not fail us
Death could not silence him
nor the waters of the deep drown him out
Mandela and Sisulu heard him too
through their cell walls, in the quarry
and on the beach as they gathered sea weed.'

41.
'Out of the great dark he arose
the rock door to his tomb rolled back
He blinked as he walked into the light
as many black and white hands reached
out to tear off his winding sheets
"We see you Madiba![51] You are returned to us
by the same robbers who stole our liberty."'

42.
'White boy, let me tell you an old story
Once upon a time, a jackal came across
a scorpion standing by the side of a river
it had a fat white body and a big sting
"Friend Jackal," said the scorpion
"Carry me across the river on your back
my children are hungry, and I cannot swim."'

43.
'Don't smile at me, like I'm telling you

---

[50] Stompie Moeketsi was a teenage activist murdered in January 1989 by members of Winnie Mandela's bodyguard known as 'The Mandela United Football Club' - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stompie_Moeketsi accessed on 31/10/2016.

[51] Nelson Mandela's clan name by which he is affectionately known and referred to.

an old joke you've heard twenty times
I know other people tell this story
but there is wisdom in these old tales
Think of it as a mirror I hold up to you
Let the cataracts fall from your eyes and
see yourself for what you truly are.'

44.
"'Comrade scorpion," replied the jackal
who was wise in the ways of the world
"If I jump into the water with you on my back
you will sting me and we will both drown
Besides -
what will you give me for this service
To you and your hungry children?'"

45.
"'You have no need to worry, friend jackal
I swear on my mother's many legs
that I will do no such thing
And as a reward for your valued efforts
I will teach you the wisdom of the West
so that you and your children's children
will never want or go hungry.'"

46.
"'Very well," said the jackal. "Climb
onto my back and sit on my head
but mind you keep your promise"
And he plunged into the rushing water
Half way across the scorpion became afraid
"I will drown," he wailed
and he stung the jackal on its ear.'

47.
'The jackal howled with pain
as the poison coursed through him
"Why did you do that?" he gasped
"Now we will both drown"
"Because I must sting," said the scorpion
"That is my nature," and he leapt onto a twig
which the current carried to the far bank.'

48.
'I think you understand now
why we can't be brothers or even friends
You white people are cuckoos in the nest
Sure we suckled off the same breast
but you guys are wet-nursed
You've got no claim to any birth right
Our time is here, South Africa is ours.'

49.
'Makhanda cries out from his rock
His voice rings in our ears
Our blood thickens and
our limbs recover their strength
The warriors gather as their manhood rises
the bellies of our women are fat with children
Dawn is breaking, and the ancestors wait.'

The Prison Warden

On the beach a gaunt man in prison
issue shorts, stares out to sea
He too hears Makhanda's cries
What is he thinking? Is it
of his comrades in exile and his people
suffering under this cruel regime
or the soft arms of his winsome wife?

A snarling dog with a rifle intervenes
"Back to work boy, you're not here to dream"
Madiba resists the instinct to snarl back
He puts aside his hopes and visions
and returns to his barrow of sea weed
"Hewers of wood and drawers of water"[52]
That is the lot of Black people in South Africa.

The Prison Warden. On Robben Island
he is your demon or your demi-god. Ask him
for an extra blanket in the icy winter
or a chunk of bread to dip into your pap
Flatter him, and perhaps you will get
a week-old newspaper tucked under your mattress
or the letter from the son you've never seen.

1.
'That was me, Poet. I was his warden
at least for some of his dark time
And he re-fashioned me, made me better
than I was, better than I had a right to be
He and his companions will re-forge our country
We will arise out of the furnace of our hatreds
'And South Africa shall belong to all who live in it.'[53]

2.
'I was the censor at Robben Island
It was me they poured their hearts out to
not their wives or their lovers or their mothers
I would cut out their fears and longings
and stick them in a scrapbook for Pretoria

---

[52] Joshua 9:27

[53] The African National Congress, 'The Freedom Charter', *Historical Papers*, University of the Witwatersrand, http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1137/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf. Accessed on 14-1-2018

All their loved ones received was my lacework
a delicate lattice of absence and silence.'

3.
'How did this strange relationship come about?
That I, an Afrikaner, the son and grandson of boers
men who fought the British to a standstill
should count as my friend public enemy number one
The Communist, the inciter of hatred who turns
the peace-loving bantu against the white baas
I might as well be friends with the devil himself.'

4.
'My Pa was with Ossewa Brandwag[54]
Smuts stuck him in jail with other troublemakers
or he would have fought for the Germans
After the war things changed for us Afrikaners
The troublemakers came to power
democracy is like that. The people don't always do
what their masters expect them to.'

5.
'We lived on a farm near Louis Trichardt
It was a mighty time for the Afrikaner people
Pa thought our years in the wilderness were over
that the promised land was finally ours
We had a hundred and twenty-five morgen[55]
all that was left of Oupa's farm, Canaan
which once stretched as far as the eye could see.'

6.
'Every year we went to Monument Koppie
to celebrate Blood River with the Volk
Pa grew a beard and walked with the oxwagons
In the evening there was singing and dancing
and speakers who promised to keep the faith
and preserve the land for Afrikanerdom
because that was God's will, and the Bible said so.'

7.
'Pa went to other meetings as well
where ugly words were uttered and blood-oaths
sworn, things that the day should not hear
things that snared your soul in a noose of hate
When I was ten, Pa presented me with pride
His son would follow in his footsteps

---

[54]Literally 'Oxwagon Firewatch' a Secret Afrikaner Nationalist organisation formed in 1940 which supported the Nazi regime in Germany.

[55] South African measure of land area; 1 morgen is about 0.85 hectare.

the future of our people would be safe with me.'

8.
'I hung over that dark chasm of expectation
while those fiery voices whispered in my head
and I prayed to God not to let me fall
Something gave me strength to deny them
I did my army service in Kimberley
It was there that I met my first Englishman
My best friend in the army was a rooinek.'

9.
'That was when I really began to look at things
to see that other people lived in this house
There were a host of cousins who came in and out
who dug in mines, and made things in factories
who grew things on farms, who bought
and sold them in shops and markets
who also lived and died for South Africa.'[56]

10.
'I stayed on in the P.F.[57] for a few years
When I came back Canaan was different
Pa had swept away the Tswana people
who had lived on our farm for generations
Put them in a bin and emptied it in the veld
Their little houses, their small holdings
all ploughed over and planted with maize.'

11.
"'What have you done Pa?" I asked
"These are our people they belong here
We look after them, and they look after us"
"No, my son. They are just k****rs. This farm
is for white people. They must go to their own land
The government has made space for them elsewhere
I'll go into town and hire some boys[58] to work for me.'"

12.
'So I got into my bakkie[59] and drove to this space
the government had made for our people
They lay like leaves scattered over the veld

---

[56] The final line of 'Die Stem', the South African national anthem, is 'Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe, ons vir jou Suid Africa.'

[57] Permanent Force – the regular army.

[58] In apartheid South Africa, black men and women who worked on farms or in white homes were referred to derogatorily, as 'boys' or 'girls'.

[59] South African slang for a pick-up truck.

Blown into a vile place with no water or shelter
They had come to the valley of the shadow of death
I found Phineas whose pa worked for my oupa
And his wife Nora who wet-nursed me.'

13.
'What can I do, how can I help you?' I said.
Nora looked at me as though I was a puff adder
then she turned her back and walked into
a corrugated iron shack that stood behind us
Phineas followed me as I walked to my bakkie
I saw his left hand twitching, and his knotted
neck muscles writhe like a raised sjambok.'

14.
'"You people!" he shouted, "You people have taken
Everything from us. You have destroyed us
You are serpents! Liars! Devils!
God will punish you for this. Your own God
your Jesus." His brown eyes which had only shone
on me with kindness, were daggers of jagged light
Never had a black man spoken to me like this.'

15.
'After that I began to question my heritage
A swamp of grievance and hatred, always
blaming someone else for your misfortunes
How could the Volk survive on this pap[60]
of lies and hypocrisy? This was wanton cruelty
we were like boys pulling the wings off flies
or trapping toktokkies[61] in jam jars.'

16.
'I joined the prison service
They posted me to Dundee in Natal
near where the Boers fought Majuba
I met an English man there and we became friends
My father never spoke to me again
He called me, "Die Mantis"
The creature that eats its own family.'

17.
'Who knows the pull of the currents
or the paths of the wind? I was an outcast
Me and my friend lived like lepers on the
outskirts of society, until our raft fetched up
on the shores of Robben Island. But we were survivors

---

[60] Pronounced 'pup' – Afrikaans for porridge.

[61] A large dung beetle.

I spoke Xhosa and had learned to be useful
They put me on the political wing.'

18.
'Three years dragged by like hungry piccanins
I circled warily around these dangerous men
like a jackal around a gang of meerkats
I was slave-master, benefactor, servant and spy
Everything was a negotiation. They closed ranks
and fought against extinction with skill and cunning
just as the Boer commandoes had fought the British.'

19.
'Then the Raka[62] business pounced on me
He was a brute, born of viscous stock and
weaned on hatred. His usual weapons
were his foul tongue and his raging fists
But I caught him with his rifle butt raised
Madiba stood firm glaring back at him.
"Nee man!" I shouted, "jy doen verkeerd."'[63]

20.
'He reported me to the commandant
His superior had humiliated him
in front of a k…..r. This was a betrayal
of his birth right. But the commandant
was aware of the perils of striking Madiba
It was Raka who left in disgrace
Madiba was indeed a most dangerous prisoner.'

21.
'After that, we began to see each other
to greet sincerely and talk respectfully
I learned to be honest with them, not to lie
if a letter came which could not be seen
If they wrote things that could not be sent
I said so. They grew to respect the boundaries
Repayment for Raka came soon enough.'

22.
'Some months later, as I sat down on a rock
I heard the grate of pebbles and a shout
"Pasop Meneer!"[64] A sandaled foot
crashed down. Beneath it I saw a broken pincer
and a twitching sting. "It is a bad thing

---

[62] Raka is the man-beast in N.P. van Wyk Louw's epic poem 'Raka' published in 1947.

[63] "No fellow, you do wrong."

[64] "Watch out Mister!"

to be stung by that fellow." Madiba said
as he turned and strode back to his work.'

23.
'There were joyous times too; a bucket of crayfish
boiling on a smoky fire on the rocky strand
and a sauce of pungent spices, produced from
a crumpled packet somehow concealed from us
Warden and prisoners savouring the delicate meat
Then we became just a group of men laughing
at some joke and sharing the bounty of Eden.'

24.
'When he was moved from the Island, I moved
with him. First to Pollsmoor and then Victor Verster
From hell to purgatory, I oversaw every aspect of his life
Political changes forced our ministers to sing like doves
and secret negotiations became regular as spring rain
But when a car crash took my son, as one had his beloved son
he found the time to put his hand upon my shoulder.'

25.
'Now he emerges from the charnel house
He has swapped his shroud for a business suit
and miraculously his flesh still sits well upon him
Winnie, who sang his praises to the indifferent world
leads him by the hand. A cheering host surrounds
him jostling and singing, as the camera's brutal
scrutiny picks up his uncertainty and hesitation.'

26.
'And I, his watchman, watch the face that I
have come to love better than my own father's
It is inscribed with the wounds and humiliations
of twenty-seven years of imprisonment
His spare frame, loaded down with the immense hopes
of his people, seems too frail a vessel to brave
the surging crowd, but he and Winnie press on.'

27.
'He gets into a battered Mitsubishi
with an ANC poster hastily stuck onto its side
The police escort him through the city on shiny BMWs
Then he is on a podium. Sisulu introduces him
He frowns, straightens, and give the ANC salute
"Amandla!" he shouts. "Megawathu!" the people
thunder back and the temple of apartheid trembles.'

28.
'I am weeping Poet, and I know you too
are weeping, and so are all true-hearted South Africans

For a good man has been sent to lead us out
of the land of Egypt and all of us who watched him
reappear this day will remember it as one
of the great days of our lives, when the clouds parted
and we saw for ourselves, the hand of the Almighty.'

The Prisoner's Wife

". . . and [thou] shalt be what thou art promised.
Yet do I fear thy nature, it is too full o' th' milk
of human kindness to catch the nearest way.
Thou wouldst be great, art not without ambition
but without the illness should attend it.
What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou holily;
Wouldst not play false, and yet wouldst wrongly win."[65]

I have dug the ell square pit and poured
libations for the dead. Now they come
whispering from the shadows. I push aside
many as I wait for her, and she comes
bold and defiant. As she was when she walked
into Victor Verster[66] *to reclaim her husband*
with the eyes of the world upon her.

1.
'So it's me you want to talk to now
Mr Paparazzi Poet. Get your long lens
out of my backside. Aikona![67] You people
and your pretensions. Who gave you
permission to re-imagine me? Your ugly
white mind cannot begin to imagine
what we went through. Me and my children.'

2.
'He had it easy on the island, and in here
the governor dances to his tune. It is all
Mr Mandela now! But who stood by him and looked
after his children while he ran around making
speeches, sitting on committees, talking - talking
and impressing white women with his charm?
Who kept his name alive? Tell me that!'

3.
'It was me. I shouldered their world
when it collapsed after Rivonia, and they
were dispatched into darkness. I made them
mythical heroes. The movement was in disarray
In a few years they would all have been forgotten
their names obliterated from our memories
by the relentless tides of history.'

---

[65] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1:5:15 – 22 – [thou] is my insertion.

[66] The low security prison where Mandela was held before his release.

[67] Xhosa/Zulu slang expression for 'By no means!', 'Get lost!' or 'Go to hell!', http://www.dsae.co.za/#!/word/420/ayikona accessed on 7/6/2018.

4.
'That was what the government wanted
but I did not let it happen
They could not shut me up. No cage
they devised could contain me
Wherever they sent me I found friends
and helpers and when I came to visit him
on the Island I behaved like the Queen of Sheba.'

5.
'When they threw me in jail and their thugs
interrogated me, I went on hunger strike
The MP Helen Suzman asked questions about me
Their ambassador was summoned to the White House
When they banned me to Brandfort, a lawyer
of their own tribe took up my cause and fought
for me. I was a boil they could not lance.'

6.
'I would stride into a dress shop like a movie star
and demand to be served. The assistants gaped
while I tried on their stock at my leisure, as their
white customers, yoked to their prejudices like oxen
waited patiently outside in the searing heat
unable to share a shop with a black woman
or purchase an item that had touched her body.'

7.
'All their men desired me, the forbidden fruit
doubly prohibited because of my politics
and my husband. I knew this when that beast
Swanepoel questioned me for hours while I stood
on two bricks with the stench of his sweat
in my nostrils. And he knew this, and that I knew
he had pawned his soul for me and lost the receipt.'

8.
'Through my suffering the suffering of others
became visible. My strident voice carried
with it the cries of the voiceless. Their story
was my story. Their suffering was mine
and my children's. I opened a window
onto the lives of black people and forced
white South Africa to look through it.'

9.
'In my innocent days, I did not know
how a woman should deal with these things
but over time I have found out. Years ago
men came to my house to kill me. Black men!

I woke as a cloth was slipped around my neck
For a moment I froze, the strangler paused
Then my screams woke all the neighbours.'

10.
'The lioness inside me roused herself
I fought back with my nails and my teeth
I tore wounds in their arm and faces
and they fled. These were spineless cowards
They came expecting a weak cowering woman
and found a demon defending her lair
But that attack was only one of many.'[68]

11.
'I wrote to my husband in prison, and I sent him
messages by other means, in case the censor
stopped my letters. I said, "My husband, I respect you
and I believe in the struggle. You have done what
you had to do, and now you cannot be by my side
But you must do your duty as a man, and find ways
to protect me and the children I have borne you."'

12.
'He has such faith in authority, my husband
In law and order, in the white man's so-called justice
and honour. So, my husband wrote many letters
He wrote to the Minister of Justice, he wrote to the
Chief of Police, he wrote to the Mayor of Orlando
"Please help me, I am deeply concerned about the
safety of my wife. Please send men to protect her."'

13.
'Who did he think was sending the men to kill me?
If he had been a true man, a leader of the people
like his ancestors, like Makhanda or Ndlambe
He would have sent messages to his comrades
in the ANC. He would have said, "My brothers
I am suffering here in the white man's prison
because I am your leader and faithful to the cause."'

14.
"'But you are free men fighting for the cause
in London or in the training camps of Zambia
and Malawi. Now the government sends thugs
to harm my wife and children. I ask you, my comrades

---

[68] Nelson Mandela, *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*. Edited by Sahm Venter, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018), 258.

let some men from *Umkhonto We Sizwe* and some others
of the faithful from Orlando keep watch over my house
And I will return and lead us all to freedom. Amandla!'"

15.
'But he did not say that, and being a woman
I have to find my own ways and make
my own alliances. Sometimes, this is with people
whose company you might not wish to keep
I have become a dangerous woman, someone
people take care not to cross, and I like that
People move aside when they see my Kombi.'

16.
'Take care Mr Poet not to fall for my allure, or imagine
you can re-shape the myths I leave behind me
I accept no favours from you. I will let you sleep
in a warm corner of my house and feed you tit-bits
I will be your friend and confidante for just as long
as you are of use, but do not make yourself at home
or I will sling you out and slam the door in your face.'

17.
'I am safer since I formed my football team
They answer to me, not that old fool in Lusaka
Together we have brought some order to Soweto
We put things right, collect debts and resolve disputes
So why do I get these messages from Lusaka saying,
"You must break of all contact with this or that person
your activities are bringing the ANC into disrepute?"'

18.
'They do not understand the people as I do
I stood with the kids of Soweto when all
they had were rocks to throw at Saracens
I ran with them from the dogs, the tear gas
and the bullets. I had the courage to tell
white and black the revolution was coming
with necklaces and matches to liberate us all.'[69]

19.
'It is true the kids from Daliwonga High School came
with petrol and matches and burnt down my house
Everything we treasured was destroyed by our own
children for no good reason. And I grieve for that house
like it was my mother. But I ask you Poet

---

[69] Winnie Mandela – 13th April 1986 "We have no guns – we have only stones, boxes of matches and petrol. Together, hand in hand, with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country." Emma Gilbey, *The Lady: The Life and Times of Winnie Mandela* (London: Cape, 1993), 145.

the people love me and stand behind what I say
so who was it that set them against us?'

20.
'Yes, a child was killed by one who was close to me
Some said this child was a spy. This was possible
I do not know the truth of it. And there were other
killings laid at my door, but I never ordered
or asked for the death of any person
You must understand the times we live in
Violence has become a way of life for some of us.'

21.
'I admit that matters went wrong, badly wrong
My people overreacted to things I said in anger
They misunderstood me and behaved rashly
without consulting me. They did not understand
that the government surrounded me with spies
and agents who looked for ways to provoke us
And the Nationalist press were a pit of serpents.'

22.
'The cost of my marriage was high. My bed
was cold without my husband, and I tell you Poet
I am not a person who is comfortable in an empty bed
I have been lonely, and lived in fear of the bullet
or the petrol bomb through my window in the night
of police hammering on my door and dragging me off
to keep at their mercy in some loathsome cell.'

23.
'But what would my life have been if I had not met him?
A social worker, an educated black woman frustrated
by my white superiors and intellectual inferiors
Perhaps I would have been taken as a trophy wife
an ornament to grace the home of a dull man
My trials have fortified me. The whole world knows
my name and I know who I am, and what I can do.'

24.
'Now the miraculous is about to occur
He is to be returned to me, to his family
to his people. The world waits for him
Every eye, every lens is focussed on us
No, on him. I will become an appendage
the dutiful wife who waited for her husband
now steps aside as he returns to his rightful place.'

25.
'Now I fear for him and for our revolution
He is the great conciliator, but in prison

he has forgotten the nature of the veld fire
New growth cannot emerge until the dead
bush has been consumed. He has the power
to lead the revolution but he will not risk
getting himself burned in the course of it.'

26.
'He will play into their hands, take their bait
and fall into the traps they set. He will dress himself
in their clothes and think he is one of them
He will think their thoughts and believe they are his
He will speak their words with his voice, and in his
delusion he will say, "Let us do it this way for the good of all
the people." But it will be good only for white people.'

27.
'I keep myself beautiful for him, and for our people
We are their royalty and when we step out of this place
the world must see that we are still man and wife
that the separation imposed on us has strengthened
the bond between us. They call me "Mother of the
Nation" and that is a title I have earned. Together
we can bring a new, a black South Africa to its birth.'

28.
'But he must take care not to thrust me aside
like an old suit that has served its purpose
Because I have fought at the barricades
and I have suffered and endured and found
ways to survive that only I could find
The revolutionary's fire burns inside me
And no-one will ever put me out!'

‘One of those Commies!’[70]

Hector flung himself against the barricade
and the Trojans followed him screaming their war
cries and hurling their man-cleaving javelins
They abandoned the boutiques and coffee shops
of Hillbrow and Camden Town for a dusty campus
in Maputo or a ramshackle classroom in Lusaka.

They had no ‘shields of bronze and sevenfold ox-hide,’[71]
No ‘helmets, two horned, four sheeted with the
horsehair crest,’[72] to protect them. Their weapons
were their pens, their eloquence, their pamphlets
and symposiums, their refusal to be silenced
or intimidated. This is the nature of true courage
To fling your fragile body against the barricade.

After he got the phone-call, J rushed
through Maputo to the University. Her papers
were strewn around the room. He stood
on a file labelled ‘Proceedings of the Conference on….’
Her desk was shambolic, the metal top
twisted and blackened, He saw her legs sticking
out beneath it. Her Italian sandals still on her feet.

She had said they would come for her again,
but this time they did not bother to knock.
She opened a letter from an old friend
and out jumped Death. J, her husband
was too sly a fox to catch, so they found
another way to scorch his brush. Their arm
was long in those heady and terrifying days.

1.
‘Unforgettable! Did you see how Nelson’s face
appeared above the swirling crowds
serene and beneficent as the full moon
A blessing for mankind? And did you see Tutu
dancing about, and fussing over him
like a mother hen? The Bishop’s residence
has never had such a joyous incumbent.’

---

[70] Anne-Marie Wolpe, *The Long Way Home.* (London: Virago, 1994), 143.

[71] ‘Aias’ shield,’ Homer, VII:220,*The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011). From now on ‘*Iliad* – Lattimore trans.’

[72] ‘Agamemnon’s helmet,’ Homer XI:41-2, *Iliad* – Latimore trans.

2.
'I think we may be able to go back
Now he is free anything can happen
The brandished sword which barred our return
will be sheathed. There may not be a red carpet
but there won't be snarling dogs either
Change is coming, pillars will crumble and
my experience will be needed.'

3.
'I owe it to the thousands who died
to those who suffered in their filthy prisons
and to R.[73] Barely a night passes
without a dream of her body sprawled
like a landed fish on her office floor
covered by the bloody mess of her papers
and I wake choking on the fumes of the bomb.'

4.
'You don't look too keen
I know you have worked hard and carved
a niche for yourself in feminist studies
but London is a backwater. I must be there
when the fire scorches through the veld
when the old undergrowth is consumed
and the ground cleared for new shoots.'

5.
'My whole life has waited on this moment
We stand on the threshold of history
like Russia after the February Revolution
South Africa lies open to us. Marxism still lives
The SACP[74] will not repeat others' mistakes
This will be a home birth after a long labour
and the ANC will be midwife and wet-nurse.'

6.
"'At what cost," did you say?
I suppose by that, you mean your brother
Why do you bring this up again and again?
I made my apologies, didn't I? But your mother
thinks I killed him. Yes, I suppose it was
something of a betrayal, but it was necessary
for a cause greater than both of us.'

7.
'He knew how committed I was to the cause

---

[73] The anti-apartheid activist Ruth First who was assassinated in Maputo by a letter bomb.

[74] The South African Communist Party of which Harold Wolpe, Joe Slovo and Nelson Mandela were members.

I worked for. He just turned a blind eye
I defended the politicals, desperate men
and women, abandoned by other lawyers
He just messed around with his rich divorcees
I was a sop to his white liberal conscience
but such indulgences come at a price.'

8.
'Yes, I also owe you both
as you keep reminding me
You for your sacrifices, he for the money
and for the risks you both took to free me
when my foolishness put me in prison
Although you were both unbelievers, you did
big things for me that I took for granted.'

9.
'I told you our plans for escape.
He gave you money for the bribe
You found people and arranged the car
He could have given his interrogators names
and exchanged us for his own freedom
But he knew it wouldn't help him
so he kept silent, and stood trial in my place.'

10.
'Was it a noble act of self-sacrifice
or just a clever lawyer's gambit?
I followed the proceedings from London
There was never a real case against him
despite the Prosecutor's histrionics
and the lies of the police witnesses
The Judge had to find him not guilty.'

11.
'Who would it have helped if I
was tortured, as others were?
I knew too much, I was too central
the risk to the cause was too great
That is why it was so important
for the movement to get me out
and I have been of great use to them here.'

12.
'Yes, I am still faithful to the cause
I still believe socialism is the only way
even though the wall has crumbled and people
have sold their birth right for televisions
Even though Mother Russia, victor at Stalingrad
has fallen on her back, and gives herself
freely to the party's apparatchiks.'

13.
'My father believed in the revolution
"A new sun has risen in Russia," he said
"And the world will change utterly
as its light spreads among the nations
Prepare yourself for the struggle.
We are its messengers, its heralds
the apostles of the people's era.'"

14.
'He wept when Stalin died
huge tears like rain drops
When Kruschev denounced our great leader
my father's fury was immense and terrifying
"Traitors, dogs and liars!" he shouted
and flung the newspapers across the room
We did not listen to the radio for a month.'

15.
'Growing up wasn't easy for us.
"Commies! Kaffirboeties! Yids!"
We got used to the vile insults
shouted at our backs by schoolfriends
lounging like oxen at a mud pool
Fat and foulmouthed, they crooked
their fingers round their noses
and rubbed index and thumb together.'

16.
'Other wounds were delivered more clinically
the way a scalpel slices through tissue
A girl I fancied turned her back on me
I was dropped from the soccer team
I wasn't invited to the class parties
These are rejections you painfully accept
as the price for speaking out.'

17.
'We didn't have much money
but I had a scholarship to Jeppe Boys
We were tigers in our striped blazers
and we knew the oxen knew it
We would be the lawyers and the doctors,
the business men, the bankers and the judges
and partake of the fat of the land.'

18.
'But them!
They think they were the lost tribe

That God had set out a table before them[75]
and only they could sit at it
There is still such shameful prejudice
the whole country stinks of it
Even up to the clear streams of the Berg.'

19.
'We knew South Africa's rotten core
the cities, the farms and the mines
were monsters gobbling cheap labour
and our rulers made laws to feed them
It was not race but foreign capital
that kept black people in their chains
and built Jo'burg's yellow-dirt pyramids.'

20.
'We grew up in impetuous times
dialectic was meat at our dinner table
persuasion through rigorous argument
We met, argued, and drank to freedom
organised protested and struck, the words
of the Manifesto rang in our ears
and our blood ran thick and red.'

21.
'I learned my law at Wits. We were all there
Nelson, R, J, and you. It was a hotbed
just about the only place in the country
where you could think and speak freely
Where black and white men and women
could sit round a table and talk to each other
without behaving like masters and servants.'

22.
'That is the corruption of apartheid
Like a cunning autocrat, it bribes us with bread
and circuses and makes us all its accomplices
Our good intentions are smothered in their cradle
Participation is by birthright, we whites were
the new ancien règime, there was no opt-out
Protest was an aberration or even treason.'

23.
'But we gave people hope, we gave names
to the nameless, the thousands whose existence
the barbarous apartheid state denied
Who queued for passes in grey corridors
with howling babies wrapped in blankets

---

[75] Psalm 23 KJV 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'

Who slept on concrete, ten to a tiny room
in the shanties of Meadowlands and Doornkop.'

24.
'Even so, it was a game until Sharpeville happened
when we saw those bodies strewn across the veld
like sacks of grain fallen off a truck. When we
tasted the terror that swept through the city
as our friends bought diamonds and air tickets
and queued all night outside embassies
we thought, "The storm has finally broken.'"

25.
'How wrong we were!
The apartheid state roared and scattered
our cadre like a herd of impala
The people had no appetite for revolution
Nelson and Walter were magnificent
but their speeches were like sticks and stones
thrown at a herd of charging buffalo.'

26.
'We were children playing at revolution
Our pleas for change, for a relaxation
of oppressive laws ignored. Our organisation
was trampled down and crushed. Our comrades
banned or arrested and held without charge
to emerge months later, pale and confused
as moths released from a dark cupboard.'

27.
'Lilliesleaf showed us what amateurs we were
Outsmarted by the idiots of Security Branch
in a Trojan horse disguised as a laundry van
The leadership of the party caught red-handed
Incriminating papers lay everywhere
many prepared by me and in my handwriting
They had an open and shut case against me.'

28.
'I had to get out and you were most helpful
but if I hadn't bribed that soft-headed warden
I would have faced solitary confinement and the trial
So we ended up stranded here, where I always feel
out of place. I have sat out the struggle in exile
while my friends have secured good positions
Perhaps they are better in the thick of things.

29.
'But they need me as a theoretician
an educational motivator, an illuminator

of the difficult problems that revolutions bring
To disperse the gathering clouds of black consciousness
which pose a dire threat to us. It sees no value
in white liberals. We could lose all influence
in our movement. Years of work washed away.'

30.
'My work has validity and pragmatism
but to many, it is more undesirable than ever
The leaders of this brave new South Africa
think they need nothing from us Commies
They want Marx dead in a donga, with an assegai
in his bolshie heart. Well, the wall may have fallen
but his head floats on, singing away to the faithful.'

31.
'When Brezhnev sent tanks into Prague
it felt like my father had abandoned us
and my mother re-married a brute
but I defended it, though I had my doubts
I put on a public face. It was that or expulsion
Joe was also pragmatic. Moscow was too
valuable a friend to the movement to lose.'

32.
'R would have none of it. "An evil act"
She said, "Is evil, whoever the perpetrator"
She had this fearless way of looking at things
that sometimes made it difficult for us
But she was a force to be reckoned with
When she gathered her arguments, she was
as irresistible as the tide coming up the beach.

33.
'I met Nelson once in 1962 outside
the Magistrates court on Eloff Street
He had just won a case for some black gangster
His suit had wide lapels and knife edge creases
Nelson has this charm, this way of making you feel great
but something in the way he joked with his client
made me feel uneasy about his commitment.'

34.
'We do not know what he is anymore
and the years on Robben Island will have changed him
Who knows what compromises he has made
to secure his release? I have heard he has met
with ministers in secret. Even the steadfast
can succumb to their bribes. Freedom
is a persuasive currency for a prisoner.'

35.
'They will sell themselves out to big business
if we are not there to guard against it
and shout out for the proletariat
The capitalists will wheedle and threaten
they will promise assistance to build
a new South Africa, to educate the people
to give them electricity and clean water.'

36.
But those promises will come at a cost
they will resile from their commitments
and they will never re-distribute land
But we can persuade Nelson to stay true
to the charter, and let our educational policy
be to slash and burn. The ashes of the forest
of prejudice will fertilise the fields we sow.'

37.
'And the people will hold education in usufruct[76]
from generation to generation, so that in this way
they will come to know themselves for who they are
Our teachers will peel back the husk of apartheid
and everyone will eat from the tree of knowledge
For this is their birthright and their inheritance
from the generation of those who struggled.'

[76] *Usufruct* is a limited right found in civil-law and mixed jurisdictions (like South Africa). It is, for instance, the right to use or enjoy a thing without possessing (owning) it. So, a person may have a right to use and consume the produce of fruit trees on agricultural land for a certain term but must care for the trees and the land, and return both at the end of the term.

The Mother of the Nation laments

In Orlando township, the Mother of the Nation
breaks the ice on the water bucket
in her muddy backyard and scrubs
her daughter's face. Her threadbare
uniform is pressed, her homework
placed in an ancient satchel, her shoes polished
Keen as a pocket-knife, she is ready for school.

Then Ma hurries to work at the clinic
through the unkempt streets of the township
Let breakers come, she is an adamant, a sea rock
trained nurse, mother of six, activist
formidable orator and trade unionist
She has endured constant harassment
solitary confinement, torture, and years of
separation from her beloved husband.

But to you and you and you and me
who live secure within our white skins
she is a ghost, an invisible, a non-being
Her name is not in any civic directory
her street is not shown on any map
Forbidden to use the same bus, sit on the same
park bench or shit in the same toilet as you.

1.
'Why do you summon me, Poet?
Why do you rouse me from my sleep
in death's dark embrace?
I, who was once among the living
am not some servant that you call
with tinkling bell or rowdy gong
to bring you tea and sweetmeats.'

2.
'You carve a trench across your page
and pour libations of blood and wine
But these strange rites you practice
do not supplicate an African soul
I acknowledge no hecatombs of cattle
The sybil's writ does not run here
nor can a golden bough intercede for you.'

3.
'When the dead come knocking
at the portals of your mind
it is hard to deny them entrance
You may find I overstay my welcome
and come to dread my voice

in the stillness of the night
as your wife sleeps easy by your side.'

4.
'But listen to me, because the dead
know more than the living
We whisper in your dreams
our voices are in the jackal's bark
The cricket's song and the raven's cry
Our anger in the crack of lightning
and the roll of thunder across the veld.'

5.
'Listen to us as we grieve
for the living. Our lament resonates
with the rhythm of the poet's songs
It clatters with the train's wheels
across the moonlit veld
It bangs on your door at midnight
and bundles you off in a black car.'

6.
'Hear me, O my children
my sons of sorrow
and my daughters of despair
as you swim through rivers of blood
and climb mountains of bones
Though you sow your fields with tears
you will reap with mouths full of song.'[77]

7.
'I hear everything now I am gone
This man lies to you, that woman
steals from you. He breaks your heart
and she your husband's
That baby crying in the lonely kraal
brings peace to you for a time
but soon he too is gone.'

8.
'God's breath blows across the veld
it feeds the thorn and the baobab
and quickens the sap in the acacia
It brings rain in the dry season
that plumps the golden ears of corn
Milk flows thick from mothers' breasts
and children grow fat off the land.'

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[77] Psalm 126:5 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy' KJV.

9.
'Men and women are like grass
that flowers quickly in the hot sun
Wind scatters its seed across the veld
Old plants wither and die back[78]
Vigorous shoots spring up
They flourish for a moment then die
even their names get forgotten.'

10.
'I hear Makhanda call to the warriors
he shakes his mane like a lion
he puffs out his chest like a toad
his voice thunders like the waterfall but
his words are sweet as the honeycomb
The warriors shout and raise their spears
as the earth trembles under a thousand feet.'

11.
'Now those warriors lie in the dust
the earth is dark with their blood
and their wounds cry out to heaven
"You misled us, Makhanda! You lied!
Your words were no charm against cannon fire
Like hyenas they tore open our flesh
Our proud impis were scattered to the wind."'

12.
'How foolish you were, Makhanda, to trust
the British! To believe the stories
the missionaries told you about honour?
I spit on British honour
You walked into their camp like a lion
but to them you were just another ox
to geld, halter, and add to their herd.'

13.
'Robben Island is your resting place
your desperate crew unused to oars
the pirated fishing boat too frail
its hull crushed by the sea's fangs
The waves took you, there was no escape
I hear you great-heart as you sing to us
"Freedom, freedom, God will set us free."'

14.
'They threw me into a cell of solitude

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[78] Psalm 103: 15 – 16 'As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth// For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.' KJV.

its walls were damp and thick as night
The floor stank of cruelty and terror
the window did not admit daylight
a naked bulb tortured my eyes
wild beasts prowled the corridors
all around me people wept.'

15.
'Men came and whispered to me
their voices oozed like water
in a cave deep in the Earth
Plop…..plop….plop
Words of poison and hatred
dripped into my head
This is how Satan sounds.'

16.
I tried to remember the names
my mother and father gave me
and to think of my dear husband in his cell
I repeated the names of our children
the souls he and I brought
into this world, over and over
until I could not hear the drip.'

17.
'And I mocked those that raged at me
as women can mock weak men
'Naartjie head!,' I called Swanepoel[79]
'You white baboons! You curse of Africa!
You lepers that Christ forgot!
Hell's doors will open for you
black devils will rip off your limbs!'

18.
'They half-thought I was a witch
those God fearing men
My curses scared them
they knew the world watched over me
so they left me in my cell
and switched off the light
when I tried to scrub the floor clean.'

19.
'The dogs of greed devour Africa
those wild dogs that ate the moon
Africa has the wasting sickness you catch

---

[79] This refers to T. J. 'Rooi Rus' Swanepoel, one of the most feared officers of the Security Branch and a noted torturer. A 'naartjie' is Afrikaans for a fruit similar to a satsuma. Swanepoel had reddish hair.

from the bite of the tsetse fly
The mother of us all lies helpless
The wasp's eggs inside her hatched
and its children feed off her flesh.'

20.
'How can you cure her?
Where is the sangoma whose potions
can rid her of the evil spirits which possess her?
You look for her but she cannot be found
where is the prophet whose wisdom
can heal the sickness of nations?
We pray for him, but we are not answered.'

21.
'Madiba,[80] your enemies surround you
they swarm about you like bees
like a veld fire they seek to cut you off
but you are one of the righteous
You do not fear them or their words
The stones that the builders rejected
Will become our cornerstones.'[81]

22.
'Madiba, our Godsent shepherd[82]
You are the watchman of your people
You walk the dark valleys without fear
You sleep in green pastures
Your head is anointed with oil
Your enemies eat at your table
When you speak the world hears you.'

23.
'Ours is the cause for which you would die
The prosecutor went pale and dropped his notebook
the judge's mouth hung open
A sigh came from the gallery
we swayed as rushes do in the breeze
your voice closed over us like Jordan's water
we rose from the river as new men and women.'

---

[80] Madiba is Nelson Mandela's clan name and the name by which he is affectionately referred to by many South Africans.

[81] Adaptation of verses of Psalm 118.

[82] Derivation from verses of Psalm 23.

24.
'I see her go feet first into the dark[83]
her mother's body is wrapped in eland hide
She pulls it in behind her and
she guides it into the world of spirits
Far above the women of the tribe
sing praises for the departed soul
"Maker, let this child return to you.'"

25.
'The passage narrows, their voices fade
she slithers on and the ancestors welcome her
The hound's mouth opens, its teeth
tear wounds in her back
She wriggles through and drops
into the Earth's womb. Gently
she lays her mother in the birthplace.'

26.
'Unto them a child is born
The nurses crowd round the mother
Some of the nurses have white skins
and some of the nurses have black skins
They clean the baby and cut the cord
The floor of this hospital is so clean
The skin of the mother is white as the floor.'

27.
'The skin of the child is milk chocolate
Open your eyes little woman and look out
at the world with your African soul
Your white daddy has left the delivery room
he is pacing up and down in a fury
Your mother opens her arms to receive you
her milk will nourish your tiny being.'

28.
'Biko!
A hero comes to deliver us from evil
His eyes pierce the lies that envelop us
his words smother veld fires of hatred
Be proud you say, be black and proud
We are all born out of the womb of Africa
We all nurse at the same breasts.'

29.
'Your voice rings out from the podium

---

[83] Burial cave of Homus Naledi http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/sep/10/new-species-of-ancient-human-discovered-claim-scientists.

in the cities the skyscrapers shake
in the deep mines they drop their tools
The herd boy neglects his goats
the farmhand straightens his back
the house-girl remembers she is a woman
the garden-boy thinks of his children.'

30.
'Oh Biko, what do they do to you?
The fist that strikes you is rotten with hate
the boot that kicks you corrupt with power
Your head hits the cell floor and Africa shakes
you groan and the world hears you
They toss your body into a Landrover
and drive into the unforgiving dark.'

31.
'A darkness has fallen upon us
We do not listen to each other
The comrades can do no wrong
They sit at the chief's table and gorge
They kill all the cattle in the kraal
without thought for dry seasons
that always follow.'

32.
'We are all one, the dead and the living
as we walk the hills and valleys of Africa
or lie down to rest by her still waters
Those who hurt one child hurt us all
Those who help a child help us all
To love your neighbour as yourself
This is the word that is given to us.'

33.
'A time will come when "no baby shall weep"[84]
a glorious time not known before
Men and women shall forget
the hate that devoured their ancestors
They shall open their arms to their enemies
and embrace them like brothers and sisters
Their children shall play together in the fields.'

34.
'The rain will fall gently on the dry veld
and the scars in the earth will heal
The flowers will be like the stars of heaven

---

[84] This line refers to the title of Mongane Wally Serote's long poem; *No baby must Weep.* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1975).

and the honey bees will drink their fill
The corn will grow green in the fields
sweet grass will cover the hills and
God's peace will descend upon Africa.'

Notes and Glossary

Impi – fighting unit of the Zulu Army, a unit somewhere between a British regiment and a division.

Kraal – a collection of huts or a hamlet often surrounded by a thornbush fence (Afrikaans).

Sangoma – a wise woman and traditional healer.

Epilogue – The Reverend Maimela composes his eulogy

That death they grieved with dirges, sorrow,
One death-lay sung by a woman, who. . .
with hair bound up . . .
sang grief's concern, whose song expressed
her fear that time would fill with terror –
vicious invasion, vile kidnap, killing,
humiliation. Heaven swallowed the smoke.[85]
(3149 – 3155)

On the road that winds through the Khundulu valley
to Lady Frere stands a little church. A one roomed
rondavel, white with a thatched roof. Inside the cool
interior, the Reverend Maimela prepares his sermon
Madiba has died. The Reverend's congregation is bereft
He must find words to console them, and reassure
them that what has been won, will not be lost.

1.
'Madiba you have departed from us, set out
for the land of our ancestors. Your spirit
floats on a river of tears, it is borne away
by our mournful cries. The bold colours
of the Rainbow Nation droop on the flagpoles
and the great men and women of this world
gather in the stadium to mourn your passing.'

2.
'How can I consider your legacy,
without thought of the love we had for you?
Let me leave objectivity to others. My task
is to sing the mystery of that love. How it was
that millions knew your face and voice
How you could quell a crowd's anger with
a gesture and allay an enemy's fears with a word.'

3.
'The mountains show themselves against the sky
and the stars begin to hide. Soon my people
will come for morning worship. They will expect
something from me. Madiba you were brother and father
to them. Did you not come from these hills and valleys?
Did you not herd your father's goats, and drink from the
same streams as us? And you never forgot that.'

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[85] *Beowulf: A translation and a reading.* Chris McCully (Manchester: Carcanet, 2018), 122.

4.
'If only Manisi[86] the *imbongi* were here, he would help me
He would *bonga* for you. He had a gift for such thoughts
and for finding the words and histories to match them
How I miss his company. Someone would bring him
to the service, and we would talk long into the afternoon
But he went to our Maker long ago. May his spirit
walk among us and give me the wisdom I need.'

5.
'My father and I built this church, when I returned
from the seminary in Umphumulo[87]
He wanted me to help him build a congregation
but I was too full of anger and energy to stay
I believed destiny waited, for those of us
bold enough to speak out, and my words could
not carry from a pulpit in Daliwonga's[88] land.'

6.
'I made my way to the big city, found lodging
in Meadowlands and work at St Mary's Cathedral
Tutu had just started his ministry. We were there
when the hive that was Soweto burst open
and the school children swarmed out onto
the treacherous streets buzzing their defiance
Then all our hearts united in fury. Our time had come.'

7.
'The square in front of St Mary's, always
a meeting place in times of joy and festivity
seethed with troubled and angry people
They spilled out onto Wanderers Street
The police corked both ends. That shook the bottle
Tutu, ever the conciliator, pleaded for calm
then a young man took the microphone.'

8.
'He smiled at the crowd and began to sing
Nkosi sikelel' iAfrica. For seconds there was
silence as his voice rang out, then a thousand
joined him in harmony. Their voices filled
the square and beat at the gates of heaven
That was the first time I heard Steve Biko
In him our prophet Makhanda lived again.'

---

[86] David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926-99), Xhosa poet and *imbongi* (praise singer).

[87] Lutheran seminary for black students in Nothern Kwazulu – Natal.

[88] Kaiser Matanzima – Head of the Transkei Bantustan and puppet of the apartheid regime

9.
'He held us all in his hands. We were
an instrument he played on, we hung
on every word. When he lowered his voice
to a growl, we were filled with thunder
When he mocked our rulers, we roared
with laughter and scorn. Then he released
the pressure, and the storm passed over us.'

10.
'But they were watching and took note
of the power of that voice, and the intelligence
that drove it. They marked him for early death
We had a different approach, Tutu and I
We stood firm against apartheid but set
our faces against violence. We were the rock
upon which the breakers crashed.'

11.
'For too long we had laid ourselves down
beneath their arrogance and false beliefs
We had cowered before their dogs and their
Saracens, fled in terror from their tear gas
and their guns, never believing in our own strength
But the Almighty had heard our prayers
and let our children show us the way.'

12.
'Although we set ourselves against violence
our outspoken defiance marked us as well
"Die Wit Wolwe"[89] came calling. Huge masked
men in army camouflage, shotguns in hand
and knives in their belts, barged into our office
Their leader pulled out a pistol and pointed it
at Tutu. He had dirty nails and rabid eyes.'

13.
"'Pasop prediker! Ek haat slim ka…rs. Hierein is 'n
doppie vir jou, en vir jou vrou en kinders ook.'"[90]
Tutu would not cower. He stepped forward
and looked straight up at rabid-eyes. "We do
The Lord's work here," he said. "Justice and
righteousness will prevail in this country. Now
get out!" And slowly, they turned and left.'

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[89] 'The White Wolves' one of the many groups of Afrikaner Nationalists who operated in the 70's and 80's often with covert police support.

[90] "Watch out, preacher! I hate clever ka…rs. There is a slug in here for you, and also for your wife and children."

14.
'We fell to our knees and gave thanks for our
deliverance. For the hand which had enfolded
us and hidden us from rabid-eyes' gaze
Then Tutu said he could not lead the struggle
but there was one man who could bring us together
And we prayed again, Madiba, that the Almighty
would enfold you and your companions in his grasp.'

15.
'I remembered this when you were restored to us
When it seemed that a miracle had taken place
That we lived in the time of the Gospels
and you and Winnie walked hand in hand
through the Bishop's garden, with Tutu
by your side. It was as if Spring had come
after endless Winter and re-made everything.'

16.
'Perhaps, Madiba, it was your graciousness in small things
Your skill at friendship which came naturally to you
without artifice, like the sweet spring Moses brought
welling out of the rock face. The letter to the warden
or your whispered prompt to Betsie V, as she struggled
to read her speech, or when you put on the Boks'
green and gold jersey for the World Cup final.'

17.
'In Genesis it is written: "To your offspring
I give this land, from the river of Egypt
to the great river, the river Euphrates."[91]
And thus, was the promised land ceded
to the chosen people. So, in lieu of that promise
the whites came. And they seized possession
of our land from Table Mountain to the Limpopo.'

18.
'But you and your companions believed differently
"That South Africa belongs to all who live in it
black and white."[92] For those are the words
in the ANC charter. And those were the solemn words
you kept faith with. It was the generosity of your spirit
Madiba that saved us from the serpent
which made ready to swallow our land.'

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[91] Genesis 15:17 ESV

[92] ANC - The Freedom Charter': http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1137/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf, accessed on 14/1/2018.

19.
'For we had been made squatters on our land
and labourers in their fields and mines
Our wives left desolate, our families
"endorsed out"[93] to shanty towns
in the barren veld our children left without food
or education, or love. But there was worse
there was no hiding from it, not for them or us.'

20.
"'They afflicted us with heavy burdens" and we
built this country for them, like the children
of Israel "built for Pharaoh store cities
Pithom and Ramses."[94] Many bitter things were done
in the name of apartheid, to protect the interests
of white people. To preserve their culture and purity
So that they were not overcome by "die swart gevaar.'"

21.
'We were all wounded in our souls
Inside each of us an apartheid tumour
organised itself, yellow and ulcerating
an inimical thing that thrived in darkness
becoming a threat to the health of our nation
"A legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge"[95]
Requiring exposure, cleansing, cauterisation'

22.
'How could we cleanse ourselves?
Who could wash the blood from our hands?
Who could absolve us all from these wrongs?
They turned their faces from this, and shut
their ears against our cries, as they lived
comfortable lives in their suburbs
Behind the razor wire and the bolted doors.'

23.
'Yet Madiba, you found a way, or so we thought
A commission chaired by a man of God
assisted by men and women of the highest integrity
It scoured the land for narratives, and called
witnesses to testify to the truths that were revealed
Offered amnesties, in particular circumstances, if the truth
was disclosed, and the perpetrator politically motivated.'

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[93] The words stamped on a pass when it was refused

[94] *Exodus* 1:11

[95] Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2002), vi.

24.
'Things poured out, creatures were birthed
misshapen and bloody. Who could have believed such stories
stalked the earth? Surely, they were not born of man
and woman. "After a few hours of testimony
the Archbishop wept. He put his grey head
on the long table of papers and protocols
and he wept."[96] And even the poets fell silent.'

25.
'The captives held in those darkened cells
the steel chairs with their leather straps
The charred copper clips dangling
from the roof like loathsome serpents
The battered bucket and the bloody mop
The wives and children, finally learning the truth
and the torturers callously denying wrongdoing.'

26.
'The reek of it. All foul and loathsome
like some sacrifice before the golden calf
the children of Israel misled by false prophets
dancing round the altar, and the priest
his white robes blotched with red
holding up the dripping knife as he called
on the god for a favourable harvest.'

27.
'Yet we were asked to forgive these things
to grant amnesty. And we did so for the sake
of the country, for the sake of our humanity
for your sake. There was no bitterness in you
despite the years of imprisonment, the destruction
of your family life, the estrangement from the woman
you loved. These sacrifices you made willingly.'

28.
'It did not come from nowhere, this *ubuntu*
this conviction of our shared humanity
"I am what I am, because you are what you are"[97]
and if you are diminished or unfulfilled then
I suffer in the same way. We are like oxen
yoked to the same plough. We pull together
else the farmer's lash falls on us both.'

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[96] Ingrid de Kok, from 'The Archbishop Chairs the First Session' in *Seasonal Fires: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 97.

[97] Desmond Tutu's formulation of the *ubuntu* philosophy in *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope For Our Time.* ed. Douglas Abrams. London: Rider, 2005.

29.
'What then are we men and women of faith?
What is our role in the scheme of things?
Are we just a lubricant that eases the meshing
of gears in the engines of human strife?
An additive, drained and replenished at our Maker's will
Until the bearings seize, and the colossal juggernaut
shudders and grinds to a halt.'

30.
'I say no. Frail though we are, we are more than this
Reeds we may be, that bend before the storm-blast
yet we can stay rooted when the mighty oak topples
Madiba you showed us how the weak can be strong
The mystery of the universe is beyond my understanding
Who can say what happens to us when we depart this world?
But I will go from it with our Maker's praises on my lips.'

31.
'Madiba, you are gone, and we are diminished. **Au!**
Whose voice can rise above the clamour?
Who can separate the factions, and calm the tempers? **Au!**
Who will stand with us when the tokoloshe come calling
or when the East wind scorches the veld? **Au!**
Words cannot contain our grief or ease the pain we feel
Au! **Au!** **Au!**'

Glossary

Bongo – to sing/perform a praise poem or panegyric.

Imbongi – A Xhosa praise poet.

Part II - Critical and Reflective Commentary

Is it still possible to write an epic poem?

> To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical Intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.
>
> (T.W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', 1956)[98]

Theodor Adorno lived through horrific times. Perhaps the horrors of the twenty-first century are not of the same scale as those of the twentieth, but the capacity for mass destruction today is many times greater. The pessimist would say that times are always horrific, the world is never at peace, there are merely lulls in the continuum of humanity's perpetual war against itself. Taken at face value Adorno's statement says something like, 'Don't bother with poetry, even epic poetry, the world will always be barbaric and poets, artists and critical thinkers cannot do anything about it. Trying to is a waste of time and energy.' I will argue throughout this critical commentary, that epic poetry provides ways to 'push back' against this nihilistic and negative state of mind.

Perhaps there was a period of moral and intellectual progress, even a golden age, from somewhere around the end of the Vietnam war until the commencement of the second Gulf war, when it seemed that international goodwill, common sense and good governance would prevail to make the world a better place. I saw it that way, but then I am a child of the sixties, of the Woodstock and 'Give Peace a Chance' generation, and the voices of marchers singing the great protest songs, still ring in my ears. Unfortunately, there is no doubt that this period has ended. As Hobsbawm writes:

> A tentative forecast: war in the twenty-first century is not likely to be as murderous as it was in the twentieth. But armed violence creating disproportionate suffering and loss,

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[98] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, 1st MIT Press pbk. ed, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1983), 34. The word [epic] in two places is my insertion.

will remain omnipresent and endemic – occasionally epidemic – in a large part of the world. The prospect of a century of peace is remote.[99]

For all our technical advances, for all the vast wealth generated by global economies and the medical advances that have allowed humans to conquer most diseases and live longer, peaceful co-existence still remains elusive. Armed violence is as prevalent as it has ever been. In this respect, our societies do not really seem to have advanced much further than the ancients. Yet men and women still stand heroically firm in the face of autocracy and tyranny. People still rise-up in revolt and overthrow oppressive regimes. People still strive to live together in peace and harmony. How is this possible? Does epic poetry play an important role in this process?

William Blake, truly a revolutionary, expressed this throughout his poetry. 'Los', the central character of his epic *Jerusalem* is 'the spirit of revolution' and 'the father of passion and revolutionary energy':[100]

> Thus Los sings upon his Watch walking from Furnace to Furnace.
> He seizes his hammer every hour, flames surround him as
> he beats: seas roll beneath his feet, tempests muster
> Around his head. The thick hail stones stand ready to obey
> His voice in the black cloud, his sons labour in thunders
> At his furnaces; . . .[101]

Poetry is a remarkably flexible and responsive art, and poets are often first responders in times of catastrophe and spiritual crisis, with words of comfort or defiance. Perhaps more so than any other art form - than the novel, than paintings or music – poetry is there when you need it. In May 2017, Tony Walsh read his poem 'This is the Place' to the crowd at the vigil for the Manchester bombing. In the early morning of 14th June 2018, the Grenfell Tower caught fire. Seventy-two people died in the conflagration. On 23rd June, *The Financial Times* published Ben Okri's impassioned poem about the tragedy, which captured the grief, the despair and the anger of the nation that such a thing should happen. Okri is both a novelist and a poet, and it is

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[99] Eric Hobsbawm, 'War and Peace in the Twentieth Century' in *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*, (London: Abacus, 2008), 28 – 29.

[100] *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake.* Morris Eaves, ed (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 278.

[101] William, Blake, 'Jerusalem', 4:33-7, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman. (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1982), 245.

significant he chose to respond through poetry rather than prose. Poetry is compact, full of compressed energy and compassion. It lingers in the memory, ready to give comfort, to express love, anger and contempt. It is a vehicle for transmission of myth.

Perhaps this is hubristic, but Adorno wrote that 'it is impossible to write poetry today' - not at some time in the past or future, but the continuous now. His statement challenges all poets who have an interest in the past, and in the way poets and epic poets in particular, influence the future by curating great events and heroic lives and turning them into poetry. Derek Walcott is someone who has thought about the role of the epic poet a good deal:

> Like the wayside prophets, the "epic" poet in the islands looks to anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artefacts, and the unfinished phrases of dead speech. These engage in masochistic recollection. *The epic minded poet* [My italics] looks around these islands and finds no ruins, and because all epic is based on the visible presence of ruins, wind-bitten or sea-bitten, the poet celebrates what little there is, the rusted wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, chains, the crusted amphora of cutthroats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, not as masochism, as if the ovens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the temples of the race. Morbidity is the inevitable result, and that is the tone of any literature which bases its truth on shame or on revenge. And yet it is there that the epic poetry of the tribe originates, in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage.[102]

As this phrase the 'epic minded poet' which Walcott uses seems to encapsulate the urge of the epic poet to engage with the past, to make some sense of it, to draw lessons from it, and perhaps to enshrine these lessons in the tribal imagination, I am proposing to adopt it (as the epic-minded poet) and make use of it in this commentary. To me 'epic-mindedness' in a poet means that he or she is interested in writing long narrative poems using themes of national and social interest which draw on historical or contemporary events, but not in a way that foregrounds the poet's own reaction to them or his or her interiority. This is what distinguishes the epic-minded poet from the narrative poet and the lyric poet. This provides a further response to Adorno; without epic poetry and epic-minded poets the decline in critical intelligence, the progress towards reification, and the descent towards barbarism could be rapid.

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[102] Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History' from *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 44, (from now on *What the Twilight Says* with the page number).

The role of the epic poet, whether it be as shaman or tribal bard, seems to stretch back to the beginning of our species' establishment of itself. Yuval Noah Harari argues that around 70,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* developed new ways of thinking and communicating, which gave us an advantage over the other hominids with which we had co-existed for millenia. According to Harari, this was an 'ability to speak about fictions'[103] and such fictions Harari maintains;

> . . . have enabled us not merely to imagine things but to do so *collectively* [author's italics]. We can weave common myths such as the biblical creation story, the Dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians, and the nationalist myths of modern states. Such myths give Sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers.[104]

Harari goes on to argue that Sapiens' deeply ingrained linguistic ability is responsible for its success as a species and I propose to argue throughout this commentary, that one of the ways in which these common myths are transmitted is through epic poetry.

Epic poetry can be thought of as reservoir of knowledge about the past which helps people to interpret the present and prepare for the future. Although history and biography are important in preserving factual records, these neither fire the imagination nor linger in the collective memory in the same way as epic. Narratives in poetic form, whether communal or individual, still have a role to play. It is still important and necessary for poets to write poetry which seeks to engage with difficult times and to turn away from introspection and the exploration of the self. Epic poetry should be more than autobiographical and deal with greater things than, 'The Growth of a Poet's mind.'[105] Like the *Beowulf* poet, epic-minded poets still need to, '…tell stories or ask questions or recall disconcerting elements of the ever-present yet ever tragic past.'[106]

In order to try to understand Adorno's statement, it is helpful to have an accurate interpretation of what he meant by barbaric or *barbarisch*. This interpretation needs to be mediated not only by contemporary sensibility but also by difficulties in its translation from German into English. *The Oxford English Dictionary* has several interpretations of 'barbarian' and

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[103] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,* translated by John Purcell and Haim Watzman, (London: Vintage Books, 2015), 27.

[104] Harari, 28.

[105] Alternative title to Wordsworth's *The Prelude.*

[106] Chris McCully, *Four Places.* (Colchester: Muscaliet Press, 2018), 44

its adjectival derivative 'barbaric'. This one seems to encapsulate something of Adorno's intended meaning:

> . . . [a term] applied by nations, generally depreciatively, to foreigners; thus at various times and with various speakers or writers: non-Hellenic, non-Roman (most usual), non-Christian.[107]

The literal interpretation of the meaning of 'barbaric' has a strong cultural and religious emphasis. It is applied to behaviour and actions of persons who are deemed to be other, whose societies have not been enhanced and improved by the benefits of classical culture and education, or enlightened by Judeo/Hellenic thought. But the Auschwitzes, the Vietnams, the Srebrenicas, and the outrages of apartheid, were not perpetrated by nations of so-called barbarians, they were perpetrated by so-called civilised nations, steeped in those classical and Judeo/Hellenic traditions. The enslavement of people from Africa for commercial interest and exploitation and the unspeakable cruelties carried out on slave ships like the Zhong, continued the vile practice of slavery, carried on by the Greeks and Romans. This was not a practice of so-called barbarians it was a practice of so-called civilised nations. It does not take too searching a look in the mirror to realise that we are the barbarians, our history is barbaric, and our memories are short.

The Spanish poet and philosopher George Santayana famously said, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'[108] But what records and memories constitute the past? Who holds them, and whose job is it to remember the past and to take responsibility for curating and interpreting it? The epic poet always had an important role in this process, and this privilege has neither been surrendered to nor usurped by other disciplines. Walter Benjamin wrote in his penetrating essay on the art of storytelling:

> Any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of epic.[109]

Benjamin maintained that all epic poets draw their narrative material from the continuum of past events, as these move from the historical into the mythical. The starting point for the epic-

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[107] [a term] my square brackets - *Oxford English Dictionary* on line, http://0-www.oed.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/view/Entry/15380?redirectedFrom=barbarian#eid accessed on 21-2-2018.

[108] Internet Encylopedia of Philosophy, Santanyana http://www.iep.utm.edu/santayan/ accessed on 10-9-2015.

[109] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 95.

minded poet is to look at his own society's history, both ancient and contemporary, and seek out sufficiently robust and numinous narratives to carry the weight of the structure he or she wishes to put in place. But this is no easy task. The epic-minded poet goes in search of such narratives and recognises such narratives when he or she comes across them. Furthermore, the finding of such narratives while often serendipitous, can seem providential to the poet. Jung spoke of certain things as having a numinosity because they derive from, 'cultural symbols…that have been used to express "eternal truths" and that are still used in many religions.'[110] While it may not be right to make use of this term, I believe that to an epic-minded poet, certain narratives have an innate numinosity, which I am going to call poetic resonance, which he or she recognises will, if correctly managed, provide a degree of transcendence and speak their truth universally.

But where does the poet go to find these narratives? Epic-minded poets must always be prepared to venture into the underworld in search of their material. Ezra Pound starts his *Cantos* with Odysseus' consultation with the dead seer Tiresias. Eliot starts *The Waste Land* with the haunting voice of the hyacinth girl, a refugee from the vanished Austro-Hungarian empire:

> Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
> And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
> My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
> And I was frightened. He said Marie,
> Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.[111]

The voices of the dead are always present in epic poems, and an exploration of the many ways in which this discourse with the dead takes place is a continuing theme of my commentary.

I went into my own past and into contemporary South African history when I searched for narratives to make use of in the poem I wanted to write for a creative writing PhD. The poem, which I call 'Rivonia' is set in South Africa in the apartheid era. That is where I spent the formative years of my life. 'Rivonia' and indeed this critical commentary, are about a wonderful country that was locked in the grip of an appalling ideology. It is about religious fundamentalism and how a belief in myths and narratives of religious superiority can engender dangerous beliefs in cultural, social and racial superiority. It is about the competing narratives and mythologies of 'chosen peoples' and 'a promised land', and how they came to be played out in the theatres of

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[110] C. G Jung and Marie-Luise von Franz, *Man And His Symbols*, ed. John Freeman (London: Aldus Books : Distributed by Jupiter Books, 1964), 93.

[111] T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', ll. 12 – 16, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, Faber Paperbacks (London: Faber, 1974).(from now on 'The Waste Land' by line number).

the court and the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is about the Afrikaner nation, the so-called 'White Tribe of Africa,'[112] and their belief that they inherited the promises made to the twelve tribes of Israel, and it is about the post-holocaust Jews in South Africa and their difficult relationships both with the perpetrators of apartheid and those who struggled against it. It is about the heroism of the women and men of South Africa, both black and white, who rose above their suffering and fear to fight for their liberty, and in doing so did not forget their humanity. It is about the strange providence that preserved as their leaders, men of compassion and vision who might otherwise have perished.

I was brought up in a moderately religious middle-class reform Jewish household in South Africa. I was taught to say prayers regularly. My mother kept a kosher household, but we would 'eat out' at restaurants or at the houses of non-Jewish friends. I attended *cheder* (religion classes) after school and went to synagogue on the Sabbath and festivals. Like our friends and neighbours, we had black servants, in our case a woman who cooked, a woman who cleaned the house, and a man who looked after the garden and helped with the heavier household duties. There were also various other helpers. I particularly remember an old woman who came once a week to weed the garden. The 'weeding woman' as my mother referred to her, with some exasperation, because she used to take out the bedding plants my mother had carefully cultivated as well as the weeds.

These people were not referred to as men and women. Even in our liberal household, it was 'the house boy' or 'the garden boy' or the 'cleaning girl'. Still less did we call them by their proper names. It was Nora or Betty or John. Their proper names, the names given to them by their parents, and their family names were usually unknown. Harrison worked for my family for years as a gardener, and later for my father's business as a driver and delivery man. He took me to school and collected me. He taught me to ride a bicycle and picked me up after various scrapes. When I was about ten he told me that his name was not Harrison, it was Sobitse Mandipo, but that I might call him Harrison if I wanted to. To my shame I never asked what 'Sobitse' meant. I found out years later, that the weeding woman managed to get her three children through university. An astonishing feat, in a country where, by government policy, black education was severely restricted. I never found out her name.

Segregation and racism impregnated every pore of South African society. It was not possible to exist in South Africa without being complicit in it. Black people were not allowed to

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[112] The title of a BBC series and David Harrison's 1983 book about the Afrikaners.

live in areas reserved for white people. There were separate schools, buses, public cloakrooms, even park benches - or rather I should say that park benches and public cloakrooms were reserved for whites with prominent signs saying *net blankes*/whites only'. If there were facilities for non-whites they were kept in some hidden place. I remember going on holiday when I was very young and seeing a sign on a rather rocky and unpleasant part of the beach saying, 'Black and coloured people have permission to swim here'. The pristine sands of Cape Town and Durban, the wonderful parks and game reserves, the luxurious suburbs in the gracious cities, the best parts of this fertile land, its schools and universities, its sports fields and stadiums, its renowned sports teams were for whites only. The doctrine was 'separate but equal.' The reality was, nearly everything for the whites and scraps for everyone else.

Nelson Mandela described the situation, when as a young man he and Oliver Tambo set up the first firm of African lawyers in South Africa:

> Africans were desperate for legal help…: it was a crime to walk through a Whites Only door, a crime to ride a Whites Only bus, a crime to use a Whites Only drinking fountain, a crime to walk on a Whites Only beach, a crime to be on the streets after 11 p.m., a crime not to have a pass book and a crime to have a wrong signature in that book, a crime to be unemployed and a crime to be employed in the wrong place, a crime to live in certain places and a crime to have no place to live.[113]

This ideological separation applied to whites as well. English and Afrikaner children were educated in different schools and usually went to different universities. I made my first Afrikaner friends when I went to the army for National Service aged 18. But the ideologists bent the rules when they felt like it. There was general bemusement in the country when Japanese citizens were suddenly declared 'honorary whites' because Japan had concluded a deal to import large quantities of iron ore from South Africa. Chinese and Indian people were non-white, as were the large mixed-race population known as coloureds.

I left South Africa when I was 23. On the day after my finals at the University of the Witwatersrand, I boarded a plane to Israel and told my parents I would not be returning. I firmly believed that South Africa was heading swiftly down the road to bloody revolution. I also had an army camp coming up, and I was not prepared to bear arms for apartheid.

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[113] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela.* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 139.

I spent some time working on a kibbutz in Israel. After that, I travelled across Asia overland by means of buses, trains and even an oxcart, to India. My first night in India was spent in the guest house of The Golden Temple at Amritsar. Here the Sikhs welcome all travellers and provide free board and lodging for them. It was here I had something of an epiphany, which I recount in the Prologue section of 'Rivonia'. For the first time in my life, I met, ate with, washed with and slept next to people from different racial groups. Slowly the malign grip of apartheid loosened from around my throat. I stood by a tap in the courtyard in bright red boxer pants, with my toothbrush in my hand and my razor balanced on a brick. On my right was a man from South India who wore nothing but a breechcloth; on my left was a young man of my own age from Birmingham in dirty jeans and a shabby vest, with a prominent Woolworths label. The morning sun shone down on us all, we were equals on God's earth. That night I spread my sleeping bag, on the concrete floor of a communal sleeping room and slept peacefully. I arrived in England in August 1974 after many adventures. At that time, it was not a good thing to be a white South African. I put my past behind me and set about making a future for myself in a new country.

Bloody revolution did not come to South Africa. A leader of strength and character reappeared. Nelson Mandela was released on February 11th, 1990 after serving 27 years in prison. Somehow, he and his colleagues managed to find ways of holding the disparate groups together and persuaded the fearful white tribes that they could relinquish power without suffering the terrible consequences they had feared for so long. On 27th April 1994, the country held its first democratic elections. Apartheid was swept away and the 'Rainbow Nation' came into being.

It was not until Nelson Mandela died December 2013, and I watched all the razzmatazz of his funeral, that I began to look back and think about my old life and the experience of growing up under apartheid.

Time line of events described in 'Rivonia'

December 1820	Death of Makhanda: The Xhosa prophet Makhanda drowns while trying to escape from Robben Island. 'The Prologue' and 'Makhanda's Prophecy' refer.
1899 – 1902	Anglo Boer War: Many Boer families interned in concentration camps. 'In the Judge's Chambers' refers.
1956	My parents emigrate to South Africa from England
11th July 1963	Lilliesleaf Farm Raid: Key members of the ANC leadership arrested and later tried. 'Drum' refers.
October 1963 – July 1964	Rivonia Trial: The trial of the ANC leaders. 'The Prologue', 'The Prosecutor', 'The Judge', 'The Mother of the Nation', 'One of those Commies' and 'Drum' refer.
July 24th 1964	Johannesburg Station Bomb: John Harris sets of a bomb in the Johannesburg station killing one person and seriously wounding seventy 'The Prologue', 'Drum' and 'The Prosecutor' refer.
January 1970	I was conscripted into the South African Army and did my basic training in Kimberley.
November 1973	I graduated from University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and left South Africa. 'The Prologue' refers.
1973 – 1974	I travelled overland to Nepal via Israel, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.
April 1974,	Golden Temple, Amritsar, Punjab, India. 'The Prologue' refers.
16th June 1976	Soweto uprising: 'Drum' refers.
11th September 1977	Murder of Stephen Biko: 'Drum' and 'Mother of the Nation' refer.
17th August 1982	Assassination of Ruth First: 'One of those Commies' refers.
1st January 1989	Murder of Stompie Moeketsie: Winnie Mandela implicated in the murder carried out by the head of her 'football team' 'Prologue', 'Drum' and 'Prisoner's Wife' refer.
9th November 1989	Fall of the Berlin Wall.
11th February 1990	Release of Nelson Mandela: 'One of those Commies' and 'The Prisoners Wife' refer.
27th April 1994	First elections of the Democratic South Africa.
1996	Hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: 'Epilogue' refers.
5th December 2013	Death of Nelson Mandela: 'Epilogue' refers.

About the Poem

Background

The poem is called 'Rivonia'. It takes its name from the Rivonia Trial, the famous trial in which Mandela and six co-accused were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. 'Rivonia' uses dramatic monologue to explore the epic possibilities of narratives arising from the trial and its outcome, from Mandela's imprisonment and eventual release and from the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa. 'Rivonia' makes use of imagined narratives to present contemporary history on the cusp of turning into myth. South Africa was a terrible place under apartheid. 'Rivonia' is about the epic struggle of men and women who found within themselves the strength to oppose that tyrannous regime and bring about its replacement by a democratic government.

I have written the poem as a series of dramatic monologues. The use of this form became popular in the 19th Century through the work of Robert Browning and Alfred Lord Tennyson although according to Glennis Byron there were several poets who also worked in this form including a number of prominent female poets like Augusta Webster, Felicia Hemans and of course Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[114] The major influences on my poem are Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book,* and for slightly different reasons (see below), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point.*

Robert Browning's poem is about the trial of an impoverished nobleman that took place in 17th century Rome. He was accused of murdering his young wife and her parents on the grounds that she was unfaithful. The speakers are the Count (twice), Pompilia, his innocent and saintly young wife (from her death bed), various lawyers and members of the public, and finally the Pope, who after due consideration of the nature of good or evil sends the Count and his henchmen to the gallows. The poem also has a prologue and epilogue.

'Rivonia' also starts with a prologue. The first speaker is Makhanda. He was a Xhosa prophet and revered leader who drowned in 1820 trying to escape from Robben Island. Makhanda is a presiding spirit in 'Rivonia', and all the speakers encounter him in one form or another, not always positively. The poem has three epicentres; the conclusion of the Rivonia

[114] Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 2 - 4. (from now on *Dramatic Monologue* with the page number).

trial in June 1964; the release of Nelson Mandela from Victor Verster prison in February 1990; and Mandela's death in December 2013. The hero of 'Rivonia' is Nelson Mandela. He only appears very briefly but is also a presence throughout 'Rivonia' and a major influence on all of the speakers, including the poet. Both Makhanda and Mandela were Xhosa and to some extent 'Rivonia' recounts the huge role played by men and women from the Xhosa tribe.

In *The Bondage of Fear,* Fergal Keane's penetrating account of the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa, he recounts an incident which says much about Mandela and the Xhosa people, quoting none other than F.W. de Klerk, the last president of the apartheid Republic:

> I remember once standing with a group of journalists who were having drinks with F.W. de Klerk when the subject of Mandela came up. The two had recently been involved in bitter controversy over the question of township violence, with Mandela accusing the National Party leader of having blood on his hands. De Klerk was fairly frank and admitted that the personal relationship between them had deteriorated. But then he put down his drink and folded his arms, thinking for a second before continuing. "What I do find astonishing," he said, "is Mr Mandela's extraordinary lack of bitterness. That is astonishing."[115]

It was this lack of bitterness and willingness to compromise on the part of the majority of the black people of South Africa that enabled the peaceful transition of power from the white minority to the multi-racial majority after democratic elections based on universal suffrage. The preamble to the ANC Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown on April 25th 1955 states that:

> South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people…[116]

It is easy to assume that this democratic ideal has its roots in European classical heritage, but it does not. It arises from the uniquely African idea of *Ubuntu*, which can loosely be expressed as

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[115] Fergal Keane, *The Bondage of Fear: A Journey Through the Last White Empire* (London: Penguin, 1995), 216.

[116] The African National Congress, 'ANC - The Freedom Charter' (Congress of the People, June 1955), Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1137/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf. Accessed on 14-1-2018.

'my humanity is dependent on your humanity'. I came across this formulation of the concept attributed to Nelson Mandela inscribed on a stone in the middle of the Eden Project in Cornwall:

> The spirit of *Ububtu*; that profound African sense that we are human beings only through the humanity of other human beings is not a parochial phenomenon but has added globally to our common search for a better world.[117]

Ubuntu is not to be confused with the Christian doctrine of forgiveness nor with the Judeo/Christian concept of 'love thy neighbour', though there are indeed similarities. It is more of a deep cognisance of the humanity of your fellow man. Desmond Tutu (also a Xhosa) expresses it in this way:

> The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called *Ubuntu* in Nguni languages….It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours.[118]

Without *Ubuntu* there would have been no ANC charter, without *Ubuntu* the white people could not have been persuaded to put their fate in the hands of the black majority, without *Ubuntu* there would have been no Truth and Reconciliation Commission, without *Ubuntu* the bloodshed would have been a hundred times greater. Further on in this critical commentary I discuss the 'epic' traditions to be found in the oral and written poetry of the Xhosa people and this is why the epic-minded poet must learn the ways of *Ubuntu*, and why *Ubuntu* is another response to Adorno; because it provides a way of avoiding 'reification' and 'self-satisfied contemplation'.

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[117] Seen at Eden project Cornwall attributed to Nelson Mandela – September 2017.

[118] Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope For Our Time*, ed. Douglas Abrams (London: Rider, 2005), 26.

Finding a narrative: the Rivonia Trial and its significance

On the 11th July 1963, a van marked with the logo of a dry-cleaning service drew up outside a spacious house on Lilliesleaf farm in the suburb of Rivonia on the outskirts of Johannesburg. The rear doors of the van opened, and several officers of the South African Security Branch got out. They surrounded the house, then forced their way in. Seven men were arrested. It was a remarkable coup. They had managed to catch red-handed almost the entire leadership of the ANC which at the time was a banned organisation, and to obtain a great deal of incriminating evidence.

In October 1963 ten people, including Nelson Mandela who was already in prison, were charged with sabotage and conspiring to overthrow the state. This charge carried with it the possibility of the death sentence although this was not mandatory. The trial was, as the lawyer and legal historian Kenneth S. Broun says:

> . . . a pivotal moment in South Africa's history and one of high drama. A team composed of lawyers of great intellect, legal ability, and integrity defended the accused. They applied their considerable skill to a cause in which they deeply believed. The accused through both their statements to the court and their testimony, demonstrated strength of character and devotion to a cause that even a hostile judge could not, in the end, ignore. The character and conduct of the judge before whom the case was tried illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of the South African judicial system. The judge may well have been independent of the government and its prosecutor, but his own prejudices guided him through much of the proceedings. International opinion and the actions of foreign governments figured in as well. White South African opinion was clearly in favour of the prosecution and harsh sentences for the accused. International opinion was almost unanimous in support for them, particularly in the newly independent African states and the Communist bloc. There was also considerable attention to the trial on the part of the major Western powers – or at least concern that death sentences would sour relations with African and other third world people.[119]

For the defendants and for the oppressed majority of black, mixed race and Indian South Africans it represented a different opportunity. It was a chance for them to put apartheid in the

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[119] Kenneth S. Broun, *Saving Nelson Mandela: The Rivonia Trial and the Fate of South Africa* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xix, (from now on *Saving Nelson Mandela* with the page number).

dock. A chance to expose the evils of Apartheid to the watching world. A platform which the all-powerful apparatus of state security was powerless to silence:

> The stand we took at the Rivonia Trial was shaped by knowledge that our struggle was morally just. We were aware that the cause we stood for would eventually triumph. We went into the courtroom determined to put apartheid in the dock.[120]

The Rivonia Trial, as it came to be known, cannot just be viewed through a legal prism. The multitude of opposing interests that swirled beneath the surface in South Africa were played out in the theatre of the court. It was about the racist subjugation of the black majority by a white minority; it was about the death throes of a white settler society; it was about the oppressed workers against their international capitalist masters; and it was about which tribe inherited the promises made to the 'chosen people' and who was entitled to rule the 'promised land'. The communist sociologist and ANC member Harold Wolpe[121] argued that apartheid merely continued the segregation for economic purposes as a source of cheap labour, which had been practiced in South Africa for centuries:

> There is undoubtedly a high degree of continuity in the racist ideological foundations of Apartheid and of the policy of Segregation which prevailed in the Union of South Africa prior to the election of the Nationalist Party to power in 1948. It is, perhaps, this continuity which accounts for the widely held view that fundamentally Apartheid is little more than Segregation under a new name. . . According to this view, such differences as emerged between Segregation and Apartheid are largely differences of degree relating to their common concerns, political domination, the African reserves and African migrant labour. More particularly, the argument continues, in the political sphere, Apartheid entails a considerable increase in White domination through the extension of the repressive powers of the state; the Bantustan policy involves the development of limited local government which, while falling far short of political independence and leaving unchanged the economic and political functions of the Reserves, nevertheless, in some ways, goes beyond the previous system in practice as well as in theory; and, in the

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[120] Nelson Mandela, 'Foreword' in Joel Joffe, *The State vs. Nelson Mandela: The Trial That Changed South Africa,* (Oxford: One World 2007), viii, (from now *The State vs. Nelson Mandela* with the page number).

[121] Harold Wolpe was an ANC member and would have been on trial had he not escaped from prison and fled to England. He is the model for the character who speaks in the monologue 'One of those Commies.'

> economic sphere Apartheid 'modernises' the system of cheap migrant labour and perfects the instruments of labour coercion.[122]

An even stranger phenomenon that manifested itself in South Africa was the way the aberrant political and economic policy was given ethical and philosophical respectability by the doctrines of racial superiority advanced by the Dutch Reformed Churches. This was based on the belief, almost amounting to a religious conviction, that the Afrikaners were the chosen people and the successors to the Israelites of the Bible. Alastair Sparks, the journalist and a leading critic of South Africa's politics, was well aquainted with the centrality of the role of fundamentalist Calvinism in the Afrikaner world view:

> But in terms of mind, no-one who has spent any considerable time around the political hustings of white South Africa listening to the great virtuosos of South African oratory, to what touches the heart and moves the crowd, who has felt the pulse-beat of platteland electioneering and heard the primal scream of the atavistic far right, or who has monitored the seminal role of the Dutch reformed church in both initiating and sanctifying the apartheid system, can be in any doubt about the centrality of the civil religion. . . . That is what Afrikaner Nationalists mean when they equate black majority rule with national suicide. It is the death of the chosen people, no less.[123]

And the Israeli historian Gideon Shimoni pointed out when discussing the visit of Dr. D.F. Malan, the first Nationalist Prime Minister to the state of Israel:

> The Calvinist Old Testament religious heritage of the Afrikaner resonated with exposure to revived Jewish statehood. As one journalist who accompanied Dr Malan to Israel explained "The key to understanding of the Afrikaner feeling was that a visit to Israel was an emotional experience which no other land in the world could offer to the Afrikaner. He felt at home there in a revealed history which, in an important sense was also his own."[124]

The inheritance of the promised land and the wanderings of the twelve tribes of Israel occupied a central position in Afrikaner mythology. Any challenge to the political right of the Afrikaners

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[122] Wolpe, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid' *Economy and Society* volume 1, issue 4 (1972).

[123] Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (London: Mandarin, 1991), 31.

[124] Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press published by University Press of New England, 2003), 26.

to rule the country as they chose was more than a challenge to the sanctity of the state; it was an affront to the will of God. But many black people were also deeply religious christians and fiercely resented the Calvinist interpretation of the scriptures put forward by the Afrikaner churches. Stephen Biko, the student leader and an intellectual architect of the Black Consciousness movement before his murder in September 1977, had this to say:

> Obviously, the only path open for us now is to re-define the message in the bible and to make it relevant to the struggling masses. The bible must not be seen to preach that all authority is divinely instituted. It must rather preach that it is a sin to allow oneself to be oppressed. The bible must continually be shown to have something to say to the black man to keep him going in his long journey towards realisation of the self. This is the message implicit in "Black Theology". Black theology seeks to do away with the spiritual poverty of black people. … While basing itself on the Christian message, Black theology seeks to show that Christianity is an adaptable religion that fits in with the cultural situation of the people to whom it is imparted. Black theology seeks to depict Jesus as a fighting God who saw the exchange of Roman money – the oppressor's coinage – in his father's temple as so sacrilegious that it merited a violent reaction from him – the son of man.[125]

All this meant that the Rivonia trial was packed with political, legal and human drama. It was attended by huge crowds, the international press and representatives of the British and American governments. Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and Helen Bernstein came every day to give their husbands moral support although the Security police placed many obstacles in their way. However, in the writing of 'Rivonia' one of the most important incidents in the trial was Nelson Mandela's speech from the witness stand. In common with the position at law in the United Kingdom, a defendant is not obliged to take the witness stand and submit to cross-examination. He may make a statement in his defence from the witness box. According to Joel Joffe, attorney for the defence, the advice given was that the defendants should not do this. However, Mandela, Sisulu and the others were not prepared to pass up this opportunity to bring their cause to the attention of the world, in order as Joffe said:

> . . . to explain precisely what they had been aiming to do and why …and to nail what they regarded as slanders and distortions made against them by the prosecution.[126]

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[125] Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 32. (from now on *Biko* with the page reference).

[126] *The State vs. Nelson Mandela,* 148.

This tactic had its risks. It meant that what Mandela said would carry little formal weight as evidence. When the leading attorney Bram Fischer rose to announce to the court that Nelson Mandela would be making a statement and not submitting to cross-examination, the prosecutor, Dr Percy Yutar, was wrong-footed. He had been preparing to cross-examine Mandela for weeks and saw this as a crucial moment of his prosecution. It had not occurred to him that Mandela might slip from his (and the state's) control in this way. According to Joffe, when Mandela dealt with the evidence against him and his colleagues in his speech, he made some admissions (where it was necessary) which could have sent him and his co-defendants to the gallows. He traversed the history of the ANC, placing much emphasis on its deeply entrenched policy of non-violence. He spoke at length and with eloquence of the harsh conditions under which the black people of South Africa lived; of the way they were oppressed both physically and spiritually; of the way they were denied a share of the wealth and prosperity of their country and of the many injustices they faced. All attempts, he said, to find a political solution were rebuffed. All attempts to mount non-violent protest were met with extreme and life-threatening violence. In Mandela's words:

> The government's answer was to introduce new and harsher laws, to mobilise its armed forces, and to send Saracens, armed vehicles, and soldiers into the townships in a massive show of force designed to intimidate the people.[127]

Perhaps this was the most significant speech ever made in South African politics because, as Broun says in his analysis:

> Nothing said or done at this trial was more likely to have an effect on its outcome than what Mandela would say in the course of the next five hours. It may have saved the lives of all of the defendants.[128]

What did the ANC and the Black people of South Africa want? Mandela put it like this:

> Above all, we want equal political rights, because without them our disabilities will be permanent. I know this sounds revolutionary to the whites in this country, because the majority of voters will be Africans. This makes the white man fear democracy. But this fear cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the only solution which will guarantee racial

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[127] Nelson Mandela, 'Nelson Mandela's Speech from the Dock at the Rivonia Trial - April 20th 1964' (*The Guardian*, April 2007), http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/23/nelsonmandela. Accessed on numerous occasions, (from now on *Nelson Mandela's Speech from the Dock*.

[128] *Saving Nelson Mandela,* 70.

> harmony and freedom for all. It is not true that the enfranchisement of all will result in racial domination. Political division, based on colour, is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one colour group by another. The ANC has spent half a century fighting against racialism. When it triumphs it will not change that policy.[129]

Mandela showed himself to be statesmanlike and a man of peace. The ANC did not seek revenge, it did not want to replace white oppression with black oppression. Despite all the wrongs done to the black people, despite all the violence, Mandela offered an olive branch. These were his concluding words:

> This then is what the ANC is fighting. Their struggle is a truly national one. It is a struggle of the African people, inspired by their own suffering and their own experience. It is a struggle for the right to live. During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.[130]

Mandela's speech, and the calm and reasoned manner in which it was delivered, had a huge effect on those who heard it. Joffe describes it thus:

> He sat down in a moment of profound silence, the kind of silence that I remember only in climactic moments in the theatre before the applause thunders out. Here in court there was no applause. He had spoken for two hours and for perhaps thirty seconds there was silence. From the public benches one could hear people release their breath with a deep sigh as the moment of tension passed. Some women in the gallery burst into tears.[131]

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Mandela's speech for the defendants in relation to the outcome of the trial but also for the future of South Africa. It said to the watching world, and particularly to the governments of Britain and the USA, that the ANC, and these men who were on trial, were not "communists and terrorists" who cared little for human life or Western values as the South African government was doing its utmost to portray. It showed them as

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[129] *Nelson Mandela's speech from the dock.*

[130] *Nelson Mandela's speech from the dock.*

[131] *The State vs. Nelson Mandela,* 160.

men of intelligence, ability and integrity with a deep understanding of the political situation in South Africa; men with whom they could, at some time in the future, do business; men whose lives should not be tossed away for the short-term political advantage of a dubious white settler regime. Harold Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' Speech[132] to the South African Parliament in 1960 was prescient.

Mandela's speech also had a great effect on the two men in whose hands his fate and the fate of his co-defendants lay: the judge, His Honour Quartus de Wet, and the prosecutor, Dr Percy Yutar. The Rivonia Trial was South Africa in a microcosm. In the theatre of the Court Mandela, Yutar and de Wet were actors drawing consciously and unconsciously on the echoes of biblical confrontations, of Moses standing before Pharaoh and crying, 'Let my People Go!'[133] and of Jesus brought before Pontius Pilate without proper charge.[134]

In the original application for this thesis I said, 'my interest is in how hero and anti-hero figures are treated in epic poetry by poets writing in English in the 21st Century' and that 'I proposed to develop my work by looking at the life of Nelson Mandela and at the myths coalescing around him and his family'. I wrote that in December 2013, in the first few weeks after Mandela's death, much influenced by the developing media storm. Mandela was already an heroic figure among certain sections of the South African public. However, if the head-count of statesmen past and present at his funeral was anything to go by, his death revealed a near universal adoration and conferred on him almost mythical status.

But there were some who took a more nuanced view of Mandela's life and achievements. Numbered among these was *The Guardian*, whose obituary spoke of Mandela having 'a certain naivety born of tutored ignorance' and being 'a man long preserved in aspic'.[135] Nor had 23 years of democratic government by the ANC brought about the radical changes which the black population had expected. The gulf between rich and poor remained huge. Economic power and control of the majority of the country's assets remained with the whites, foreign corporations and a small black bourgeoisie. The level of violence was appalling and the percentage of the

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[132] 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wind_of_Change_(speech), accessed on 11/7/2015.

[133] Exodus 10:3.

[134] John 18:28.

[135] David Beresford, 'Nelson Mandela: Obituary', *The Guardian Newspaper,* http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/05/nelson-mandela-obituary, accessed on 11/7/2015.

population infected with the HIV virus was among the highest in the world. It was almost as Stephen Biko, the student leader who was assassinated in 1977, had predicted:

> Any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless…. If we have a mere change of position of those in governing positions the black people will continue to be poor, you will get a few blacks filtering through into the so called bourgeoisie and our society will be run almost as of yesterday. So, for meaningful change to occur there needs to be a re-organising of the whole economic pattern and of the economic policies of this country. [136]

This did not hamper the development of the myths around Nelson Mandela and his ANC colleagues. Their humble origins; their struggle against overwhelming odds; their fall; incarceration; release and elevation to power; their heroic self-sacrifice and the suffering of their families provide an archetypal *bildungsroman*. It seemed to me that somewhere in the story of the trial and subsequent imprisonment and release of Mandela and his co-defendants were narratives of sufficient power and depth to support an epic poem, and I set about looking for them.

The process of writing was surprisingly difficult. To begin with, like Walcott, I am a product of colonialism. I grew up in a settler society which predicated its existence on the suppression of an indigenous population. But I occupied an invidious position. My white skin entitled me to undeserved privilege, and it made it impossible for me to comprehend what it was like to be a black person living under apartheid. Furthermore, I was born in England and my parents emigrated to South Africa when I was three. My British passport and Jewish faith prevented me from having that sense of belonging, of being part of Africa, that the Afrikaners or even English South Africans have.

Another area of difficulty was that so much material had been produced about Mandela that I felt unable to say anything fresh or poetic. Like the generation of poets after Milton or Perseus, unable to slay Medusa because to look at her is to turn to stone, I felt paralysed by the monstrous weight of it all. I needed to find a mirror, a poetic device to enable me to tackle my material indirectly. Reading around Mandela's history I came across a name that I knew: Dr Percy Yutar.

Dr Yutar (1911 – 2002) was the prosecutor at the Rivonia Trial. It was he who was responsible for securing the conviction of Nelson Mandela and six of his ANC companions for

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[136] Stephen Biko interviewed in 1977https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZHDPTE4TXk accessed on 3/1/2016.

sabotage. Most of the accused, including Mandela, received life sentences which were served at the state's notorious high security prison on Robben Island.

Yutar, a white Jewish South African, was an unusual figure. His father was a penniless immigrant from Lithuania who fled East-European persecution. He grew up in Cape Town where his father had a kosher butcher shop. He was the eldest of nine children, a clever and hard-working student who won a scholarship to study law and ended up taking a doctorate. Although he was highly qualified, it took Yutar a long time to work himself up to the position of state prosecutor, not only because of the overt anti-semitism of the police force and the Justice department but also because of his peculiar character. That he rose so high is perhaps indicative of how far he was prepared to co-operate with his political masters. Yutar was prominent in the Johannesburg Jewish community and was friendly with a number of my parent's friends. I was always aghast that a Jewish person should act in this capacity for the apartheid state whose leaders had been imprisoned during the war for supporting Nazi Germany. A number of people in the South African Jewish community had similar views but there were many more who didn't .

It had always puzzled me that Mandela and his co-accused did not receive the death sentence. South African judges were not slow to put on the black cap especially where the security of the state was concerned. I thought that Mandela's removal into the relative safety of a high security prison, where he could remain for 27 years until the political climate was right for him to re-emerge, was extraordinarily providential. After Mandela's release from prison in 1990, Yutar controversially claimed that it was through his actions that Mandela and his co-accused did not receive the death penalty. This, he said, was because he had chosen to charge them with sabotage, for which the death sentence was not mandatory, and because he did not press the judge to impose the ultimate penalty.

Further research into the background of the trial, particularly the numerous scathing comments made about Dr Yutar's character and behaviour by Joel Joffe, the defence attorney for the majority of the accused (who was also Jewish) and others, made Yutar's claim seem even more controversial and unlikely. The following, for example, appears in Joffe's authoritative book about the trial:

> As I left Klindt's [the head of the Johannesburg Security Police][137] Office, Yutar invited me into the room which he occupied temporarily in the headquarters building of the Security Branch of the South African Police. As soon as the door was closed he started

[137] My comment in square brackets.

> off a little song of praise for the police telling me that it was "quite remarkable. I have been at The Grays for three weeks now and in all that time have not heard a single word of anti-Semitism from any of these people". It didn't seem very remarkable to me. I would scarcely expect any senior police officer to vent his anti-Semitism in the presence of a Jewish collaborator, a "good Jew" from their point of view. I told him that I didn't think an absence of anti-Semitism was a cause for special praise. Yutar bridled, saying "If you were a policeman, Joffe, wouldn't it make you anti-Semitic to have people like Bernstein and Goldberg going around stirring up the Bantu?". I was beginning to get the idea that Yutar was not just prosecuting the case; he was entering into the politics of it – a thought that was to occur to me more and more often as the case proceeded.[138]

Did something else go on? Was there was an unknown back story waiting to be told, a secret passage between two un-connecting rooms waiting to be discovered or imagined? Here was something I felt I could relate to as a narrative poet. I could look at the mythologizing of Mandela, at the remarkable events surrounding the end of apartheid, and at my own South African Jewish upbringing through the lens of the Rivonia Trial. This would give me the historical and dramatic focus that I needed to write a poem. But how to write it? The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that I could not write as a narrator. I needed to find a way to let Dr Yutar and the other protagonists tell their own story of their roles in the trial and imprisonment of Mandela and his comrades, and how Nelson Mandela influenced them.

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[138] *The State vs. Nelson Mandela*, 15.

Finding a form

The shape of an epic poem

In the Overview to their book *Poetic Form,* Michael Hurley and Michael O'Neil quote T. S. Eliot saying in *Burnt Norton*, 'Only by the form, the pattern.'[139] This led me to look at those lines in more detail:

> Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.[140]

The image Eliot uses of the Chinese jar is, in its harmony of form and pattern, perfectly descriptive of the delicate interrelationship between poem and form.

The line is the vessel containing the word, the stanza the room into which the line is placed. Finding a harmonious form that would contain my material, which I would be comfortable writing in, and which would be sufficiently flexible and robust to support a storyline, an argument or an extended metaphor without becoming tedious was as important to me as identifying my overarching narrative.

The peculiar nexus of contemporary historical and political events and the development of myths and counter-myths which the Rivonia Trial and the fall of apartheid presented, felt exciting. It seemed to provide a unique opportunity to use poetic scrutiny as a way of examining and recording a unique historical event: the dismantling, by consensus, of a tyrannous and evil regime, and its replacement by a democratically elected government. It was an event which I had lived through and in a small way been part of. I wanted to weave my own myths around this armature of history and biography. Writing a series of mainly lyric poems based on various events was possible, but felt unsatisfactory. I felt I was too far away from it to carry off something as intensely subjective. Inventing a participant who could be both observer and commentator also seemed wrong, particularly as there were so many real participants who were so well known. Lyric is the dominant idiom of 21st century poetry but narrative poetry, though now somewhat out of fashion, also has a glorious past, particularly in epic. Long narrative poems were much favoured in the 19th Century as a means of reviving and combining myth and story,

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[139] Michael D. Hurley and Michael O'Neill, *Poetic Form: An Introduction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1, (from now on *Poetic Form* with the page number).

[140] T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 2001), 8

to pursue political and social critique, and to explore philosophical and psychological themes. I began to feel that a long narrative poem of this nature was an attractive challenge and something I could tackle if I could find a suitable model or template. What's more, I was discovering many events, and many men and woman of genuinely heroic stature whose narratives, if properly handled, could transform the work from historical poem to epic.

Researching contemporary epic poets who made use of historical material, I identified five models which I thought might be helpful: Luis Vaz de Camões' *Os Lusíadas*, published in 1572 but called 'the first modern epic'[141]; Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* which I mentioned above; T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land;* Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. There were several major areas of concern. The first was my position as poet. Should I use the traditional omniscient narrator style favoured by epic poets from Homer to Eliot and Pound, or should I use dramatic monologue as Browning did in *The Ring and the Book*? Should I use a regular stanzaic form? What was the appropriate line length or meter, and should it rhyme?

Camões is the only one of the five precursors identified above who wanted to use historical narratives occurring within a generation of his own life. Da Gama's famous voyage took place between 1497 and 1499. Camões himself served as a soldier for Portugal in the East Indies between 1549 and 1553 so he would possibly have spoken to soldiers and sailors with direct knowledge of the events.

Using recent history for an epic poem has many dangers. Monteiro quotes Joseph Shipley, writing in an entry for *The Dictionary of World Literary Terms,* as saying, 'if there is a caveat, the immediate past rarely serves as matter for an epic'.[142] However, it is widely accepted that were it not for Camões poem, da Gama would not have become the legendary figure in Portuguese and European history that he now is. It is even more difficult to use contemporary events to make poems in our times, because there is a danger of being overwhelmed by information and by journalism, biography and political analysis.

Eliot and Walcott populate their poems with memorable characters and narratives, but they are all imagined, none of them are based on actual people. I have already mentioned Eliot's hyacinth girl but what about the, "Hurry up please, its time" conversation in the bar, or Phlebus the Phoenician sailor, or the disaffected secretary and her callous lover? In Eliot's poem he

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[141] George Monteiro in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic,* Catherine Bates, ed., (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119 (from now on *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* with the page number).

[142] *The Cambridge Companion to Epic*, 120

sometimes gives his characters brief snatches of dialogue and at other times adopts the position of invisible narrator, but I didn't want to write in a polyvocal style or present brief sketches of people.

A few possibilities suggested themselves. One was to construct imagined narratives around events that actually occurred, to write a poetic back-story. Another was that while I could not, for legal reasons, use a person who was still alive as the speaker in a narrative, I could create a character who was an amalgam or perhaps even a poetic avatar of the actual person and readily identifiable from the narrative. In English law at least, a deceased person cannot be defamed, because reputation is personal. Discourse with the dead is an essential part of epic. If the character in my dramatic monologue had died, my narrative would arise out of a conversation with the dead. The writing of the poem could in some way constitute my own voyage to the underworld.

Something Derek Walcott wrote, quoting Pablo Neruda, expressed the need and the magnitude of the task:

> To radical poets, poetry seems the homage of resignation, an essential fatalism. But it is not the pressure of the past which torments great poets but the weight of the present:
>
> *there are so many dead,*
> *And so many dikes the red sun has breached,*
> *And so many heads battering hulls*
> *And so many hands that have closed over kisses*
> *And so many things I want to forget*
>
> *Pablo Neruda*[143]

Like Walcott I grew up in a settler society which predicated its existence on the suppression of an indigenous population. By taste and inclination I felt sufficiently epic-minded and there were plenty of ruins surrounding me as well as some exceedingly unwholesome edifices. I looked at *Omeros* carefully to see if I could adapt Walcott's methods to the narratives that had presented themselves to me.

In *Omeros,* Walcott writes aggressively back to the classical epic canon and does not simply make allusions to passages as many other epic-minded poets do. *Omeros* is Greek for Homer, and the poet (Homer) makes several appearances, sometimes as the blind itinerant sailor Seven Seas, and sometimes as an animated statue. One of the main themes of the poem is the

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[143] *What the Twilight Says,* 40.

struggle between two fishermen, Achille and Hector, for the love of the beautiful Helen. One of their companions, Philoctete, suffers from an incurable festering sore which irresistibly calls to mind the Homeric Philoctetes. Philoctete's wound, caused by an old anchor, is both physical and spiritual. It becomes clear that this is a slave's stigmata, a memory of the suffering endured on the middle passage. Some characters exist on an imaginary plane as well. Helen is an embodiment of the Island of St Lucia, which is sometimes called the Helen of the West. Philoctete's wound is finally healed when the spiritualist Ma Kilman, who owns the No Pain Bar where he drinks, digs down deep into her African roots to find a healing herbal balm.

Walcott uses extraordinary skill in deploying numerous allusions to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and the intertextuality which this process generates is subtle. However, he seems to be somewhat disingenuous in the reasons he gives for doing this. In 'What the Twilight Says' he seems to decry the process as obsequious:

> The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force. This shame and awe of history possesses poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia…. The great poets of the new world from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history, their vision of man in the New World is Adamic. In their exuberance he is still capable of enormous wonder. Yet he has paid his account to Greece and Rome and walks in a world without monuments or ruins.[144]

But if, like his fellow new world poets, he believes he has 'paid his account to Greece and Rome', why the need to pay homage to the classical past in his 'Adamic' narrative? Robert Hamner says of Walcott that:

> All the classical paraphernalia eventually proves an ironic point. What he wants in his poem is to recapture something of the vigour and elation, the vulgar, lurid reality of Homer's Greece before its lionisation through history and art. "The freshness the truth of the Archipelago… has nothing to do with the figure that we call Homer." *Omeros* is written in homage to the islands of the Caribbean and their down to earth people, who live beautifully without commemoration in historical monuments or literary masterpieces.[145]

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[144] 'What the Twilight Says' in *What the Twilight Says*, 37-38.

[145] Robert Hamner, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic,* 234 – 5.

That may be so, but it would seem that unlike Neruda and Whitman, Walcott is still engaged with Greece and Rome. Perhaps he is tacitly courting approval of colonial gatekeepers but I think it more likely to be a form of defiance, as though he were saying, "Look, I can also do this, even though I don't have the right classical education and old school tie."

Much as I admired *Omeros* it was not a model I could follow. I did not want to invent characters and stories, I wanted to use imagined narratives to examine events that actually occurred. Furthermore, while it is always possible to allude to classical themes - to argue for instance that Nelson Mandela's life has been an Odyssean journey or that Winnie Mandela has affinities with Medea and Circe - I felt that doing this was too subservient to Greece and Rome, and an unnecessary distraction. More importantly, South Africa already had its own mix of Bantu myth and tradition overlayered with Judeo/Christian myth and, as I discovered later when I came across the work of Dr Jeff Opland, its own quasi epic traditions. To introduce classical themes would seem forced and unnatural, something which diluted the strong South African identity of the narratives in 'Rivonia'.

Using dramatic monologue to construct an epic poem

These considerations led me to think that I could construct 'Rivonia' as a historically based narrative poem, a retelling of actual events through the mouths of people who took part in them or who witnessed them. My research had already revealed several potent characters with powerful voices. I began to think of them not just as participants in the Rivonia trial but as witnesses to the story of Nelson Mandela and the struggle against apartheid. I soon realised that I could not present their narratives in the third person. This pointed me in the direction of dramatic monologue. I began to look at Browning and Tennyson to see if their use of that form would be helpful. I found 'My Last Duchess' and 'Ulysses' particularly so. But these were relatively short poems. How could I write an epic using dramatic monologue?

Many years ago, I purchased second hand for fifty pence a copy of *The Ring and the Book* published by Thomas Nelson & Sons in Edinburgh around 1900. It had an attractive blue soft leather cover with an arts & crafts design in the style of William Morris. It sat unopened on my bookshelf. I went there looking for an anthology containing 'My Last Duchess' and almost by accident, opened my old volume of *The Ring and The Book*. Much to my surprise and delight I realised that I had found my model. Here was a trial which in the late seventeenth century held a city in thrall, just as the Rivonia Trial held South Africa and the world in thrall. Here was a saintly victim as heroine, a young woman sold into a loveless marriage with an old aristocrat, by a scheming and ambitious mother. Here was her murderer as anti-hero, given space by Browning's

poetry to justify his crime and succeeding only in revealing the darkness of his soul. Here was a noble judge, none less than the Pope of the time, musing at length on God's mercy and man's capacity for evil. Here were advocates scraping the barrel for arguments to obfuscate justice. All of the characters spoke in their own voices as poetic personae (not merely as alter egos of the poet) because of Browning's skilful use of dramatic monologue.

The whole was much greater than the sum of its parts. The technique enabled Browning to introduce philosophy, religion and social criticism into his poems. Furthermore, although (in contrast to the theatre) the characters never confront each other, they are all distinctly aware of each other. In the case of Count Guido Franchescini and his murdered bride, Pompilia, this awareness drives them into an intense examination of their inner emotional and psychological turmoil, which they express in their monologues. But most important of all, and what transports the poem from historical narrative to epic, is that all the monologues hang from a central spine: the trial of the Count and his accomplices for the murder of Pompilia and her parents. G. K. Chesterton observed:

> The essence of *The Ring and the Book* is that it is the great epic of the nineteenth century, because it is the great epic of the enormous importance of small things…Homer says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven as exhibited in a great legend of love and war, which shall contain the mightiest of all mortal warriors and the most beautiful of all mortal women." The author of the *Book of Job* says, "I will show you the relations between man and heaven by a tale of primeval sorrows and the voice of God out of a whirlwind." Virgil says, " I will show you the relations of man to heaven by the tale of the origin of the greatest people and the founding of the most wonderful city in the world." Dante says, " I will show you the relations of man to heaven by uncovering the very machinery of the spiritual universe and letting you hear, as I have heard, the roaring of the mills of God." Milton says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you of the very beginning of all things, and the first shaping of the thing that is evil in the first twilight of time." Browning says, "I will show you the relations of man to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the meanest and most completely forgotten."[146]

Browning had written a great epic poem from similar material to the material I had to hand.

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[146] G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, (London: Macmillan, 1903), 164.

Aristotle regarded all types of poetry as forms of representation. It was, he said:

> the poet's job … to use representation to make us enjoy the tragic emotions of pity and fear and this has to be built into his plots.[147]

Using dramatic monologue as the form of representation seemed to offer huge scope. It could facilitate the writing of an epic poem that was not about the doings of mythic heroes or gods, nor about the God of the Bible and the re-ordering of the cosmos, but about the 'tragic emotions' of ordinary men and women in extraordinary circumstances. Hurley and O'Neil say that one of the advantages of dramatic monologue is that:

> it offers a way of exploring the most outlandish and inflammatory ideas without requiring the poet to hold a fixed, resolvable or respectable position.[148]

But does dramatic monologue fit within the traditional models that an epic poem should take, or does it introduce any restrictions that Aristotle identified as problematic:

> Epic poetry resembles tragedy in so far as it is a representation in verse of superior subjects; but the two differ in that epic uses only a single metre and is in narrative mode. They differ also in length: tragedy tries so far as is possible to keep within a period of twenty-four hours or thereabouts, while epic, in contrast is unrestricted in time.[149]

Tennyson's 'Ulysses', for all that the narrative is absorbing, dramatic and insightful, is limited to Ulysses' point of view. We do not learn what Penelope thought of her restless husband 'always roaming with a hungry heart.' [150] Nor whether Telemachus welcomed 'the sceptre and the isle' which carried with it the obligation:

> . . . by slow prudence to make mild
> A rugged people, and through soft degrees
> Subdue them to the useful and the good.[151]

Or whether he shared Ulysses' adventurous spirit and would have wanted to tag along or preferred to stay and have a good time with the local girls in the 'suitor' free bars of Ithaca. It is

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[147] Aristotle *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33 (from now on *Poetics* with the page number).

[148] *Poetic Form* 169.

[149] *Poetics*, 22.

[150] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses' in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry.* 5th ed.Edited by Ferguson, Margaret W., Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 992. (From now on 'Tennyson, 'Ulysses").

[151] Tennyson, 'Ulysses', 36 - 38.

not possible to extend 'Ulysses' without changing the nature of the poem. Dramatic monologue here resembles tragedy too closely. Aristotle thought epic needed to offer length, diversity of characters and variety:

> Epic offers particular scope for the extension of length. In tragedy it is not possible to represent several parts of the story occurring simultaneously, but only the one part on stage performed by the actors. But in epic the narrative form makes it possible to include many simultaneous incidents that, if germane to the issue, add weight to the poem. This gives epic the advantage in achieving grandeur, in offering variety to the hearer, and in diversifying the episodes, while uniformity quickly palls and may cause tragedies to flop.[152]

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* with its surreal journey to the Southern Oceans and back, also suffers from these limitations. The mariner's story of survival against terrifying natural and supernatural forces, is extraordinary and gripping, but it is too personal and it does not offer diversity of character. However, by using dramatic monologue with multiple narratives over a large time scale linked by an overarching theme Browning managed to overcome these difficulties and to combine the best of tragedy and epic. It did not take me long to conclude that dramatic monologue was the right form for the material I was considering and the way in which I wanted to use it. I therefore decided to start writing 'Rivonia' using dramatic monologue despite various problems which I could foresee and which I discuss in more detail below.

Stanza, metre and line-length

There is no stanzaic convention for epic poetry. Camões' worked with *octavos* and his translator tried to mimic these by using a regular eight line stanza, but makes the comment:

> For it is an illusion to believe that the verse form of Camões epic can be replicated in English. Portuguese is an inflected language and its sentences are shaped differently.[153]

Walcott opts for regularity and follows Dante by using a form of *terza rima* throughout. Browning's long chunks of verse show so much variation (anything from 15 lines to over 40) that *The Ring and the Book* cannot be regarded as stanzaic. Eliot and Pound were practitioners of *vers libre.* I like regularity. I like to see regular patterns of verse running down the page. I think it

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[152] *Poetics*, 48.

[153] Luis de Camões, *The Lusíads*. Translated by Landeg White (Oxford World's Classics. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxi.

adds gravitas to my writing. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, small chunks of text are easier to work with. They can also be numbered, and this enables you to find lines and move bits of verse around easily. I had worked on long(ish) poems for my MA thesis, and had developed an affection for a seven line stanza, which I was comfortable working in.

My guiding principles for the use of a regular stanza are relatively simple. Each stanza should contain at most two ideas or actions. These should end with the stanza. I dislike the practice of running one stanza into another and rarely do it. This forces you to refine your arguments and narratives. One of the beauties of a seven line stanza is that it is sufficiently capacious to encompass an argument but not so large that it becomes boring requiring lines to be padded out with superfluous words. I decided to make a start in this way and soon became confident that it would suit my purpose.

Rhyme is intimately linked with stanzaic form and my choice of a seven line stanza forced me to consider whether or not I was going to use a regular rhyme scheme. Fortunately, this decision could be made quickly. I knew I was simply not a good enough craftsman to sustain any formal rhyme scheme beyond a few stanzas. Nor (as Milton firmly says in his note on his verse form),[154] was rhyme ever a requirement of epic poetry.

The decision on whether to use a regular metrical line length was more complex. The classic line length for epic poetry is the dactylic hexameter, the metre of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Aristotle places great emphasis on this:

> The difference between epic and tragedy lies in the metre and length of the plot.… As for the metre experience has shown the suitability of heroic verse. . . . Heroic verse is the most solemn and stately metre. . . . For this reason, no one has composed a long structure in any metre other than heroic.[155]

It is easy to understand why. Epics were intended for formal performance before large audiences. Poets were schooled in the grandiloquent style of the epic tradition. The hexameter lends itself to this. It is a fine vehicle for sonorous declamations by oral performers, and the line is long enough (and therefore has sufficient ambit) to lend itself to the insertion of extended similes and formulaic phrases, which helped convince the audience that what they were hearing

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[154] 'The measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, … rhyme being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially,' John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 2.

[155] *Poetics*, 48 -49.

was not the rhythms of normal speech, but the actions and speech of heroes and immortals. As Beissinger, Tylus and Woodford point out:

> Oral epic is typically marked by compositional devices that facilitate performance and transmission, as well as by content that is regarded as deeply traditional, at times even mythic (bringing with it an identification of oral epic with story patterns that are both ancient and widespread).[156]

In the English epic, Spenser made his own nine line stanza with eight iambic pentameters and a hexameter but for Milton 'English Heroic Verse' meant iambic pentameters. Alexander Pope was a great admirer of Homer's metres and strove to emulate them. In his introduction to his translation of *The Iliad* he said:

> It only remains to speak of the versification. Homer (as has been said) is perpetually applying the sound to the sense, and varying it on every new subject. This is indeed one of the most exquisite beauties of poetry, and attainable by very few: I only know of Homer eminent for it in the Greek, and Virgil in the Latin. I am sensible it is what may sometimes happen by chance, when a writer is warm, and fully possessed of his image: however, it may reasonably be believed they designed this, in whose verse it so manifestly appears in a superior degree to all others. Few readers have the ear to be judges of it: but those who have, will see I have endeavoured at this beauty. [157]

But Blake writing *Jerusalem* a century later (and perhaps anticipating Pound) seems to reject the notion of pre-ordained regular meter altogether:

> When this verse was first dictated to me I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward but as much bondage as rhyme itself. I have therefore produced a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables. . . . Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race.[158]

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[156] Margaret H. Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Lindgren Wofford, eds., *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7 (from now on *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* with the page reference).

[157] Alexander Pope, 'Preface to the Iliad of Homer,' https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6130/6130-h/6130-h.html, [xliv], accessed on 10/2/2019.

[158] William Blake, 'Jerusalem,' *Blake: Complete Writings ; With Variant Readings.* Edited by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 621.

The use of the hexameter by contemporary poets writing long narrative poems on epic themes is mixed. The compulsion which used to be felt by poets that an epic poem had to mimic the classical tradition and be written in hexameters has long disappeared. Pound's thoughts on composition were extremely influential. Included in his list of 'Don'ts for an *Imagiste*' was:

> '3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.'[159]

Eliot, who wanted his poem to be heard not just read, frequently varied his line in *The Waste Land* depending on what he wished to achieve and who was speaking. When he wanted to mimic a classical passage or give a grandiloquent feel, he used hexameter with great facility. He did not work to a pattern or rigid pre-determined framework. Every line is crafted so that Eliot, and Pound as his editor, achieve what they require within the context of the poem as a whole. Peter Howarth explains this modernist shift well:

> Without an obvious genre or formal pattern, no element in the work is there as just a means – either to fulfil someone's expectations, as a genre does, or to fulfil the requirement of a metrical pattern decided before the poem came into being, like a sonnet.[160]

However, only a few of the many contemporary verse translations of classical epics use hexameter. Richard Lattimore's translation of *The Iliad* stays true to the hexameter and achieves a considerable dignity and sonority as here at the death of Hector:

> He spoke, and as he spoke the end of death closed in upon him,
> and the soul fluttering free of the limbs went down into death's house
> mourning her destiny, leaving youth and manhood behind her.[161]

But, Seamus Heaney, in his recent translation of Book VI of *The Aeneid*, felt no compunction to maintain Virgil's dactylic hexameter:

> Her countenance suddenly
> Paled and convulsed, hair got dishevelled,
> Breast was aheave, heart beating wilder and wilder.

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[159] Ezra Pound "A Retrospect" and "A Few Don'ts" (1918), *Poetry Foundation* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69409 accessed on 16/3/2017.

[160] Peter Howarth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry*, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

[161] *Iliad* – Lattimore trans, 467, (22:ll. 361-3).

Before their eyes she grows tall, something not mortal
Enters, she is changed by the breath of the god[162]

Nor does Heaney use the hexameter in his own mini-epic sequence 'Route 110' which appears in his collection *The Human Chain*. Using intertextual weavings with Virgil, and what Eliot described as Joyce's 'mythic method',[163] Heaney succeeds in merging the mythical and the personal, filling the mundane journey by bus from Belfast to his home near Cookstown and the birth of his granddaughter with epic undertones:

But silent now as birdless Lake Avernus.
I hurried on, shortcutting to the buses,
Parrying the crush with my bagged Virgil,
. . .
Then racks of suits and overcoats that swayed
When one was tugged from its overcrowded frame
Like their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge.[164]

In this poem Heaney demonstrates that the practice of writing long narrative and epic poems, using a form of free verse with mixed line lengths but with a proclivity to iambic pentameter has become well established. Other factors, like the sense of the line, the rhythm of a dialogue, or even the chosen stanza form, can be allowed to dictate the line length. An epic-minded poet should not feel pressurized to use hexameter simply because this was the way it was done in the past. As Walcott put it:

New World poets who see the "classic style" as stasis must also see it as historical degradation, rejecting it as the language of the master.[165]

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[162] Publius Vergilius Maro, *Aeneid, Book VI*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 6, (ll. 71-5).

[163]'In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.': T. S. Eliot, '"Ulysses", Order and Myth' in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 177. From now on *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* with the page number.

[164] Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 49.

[165] 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says:* 39.

It is therefore something of an anomaly that Walcott chose to use a fairly rigid hexametric line and a three line stanza throughout *Omeros,* a form which, Fumagalli maintains, bears 'the impress of Dante.'[166] *Omeros*, as Hamner notes:

> . . . is composed of sixty-four consecutively numbered chapters of three cantos each, distributed over seven books. The pattern of loose hexametrical three-line stanzas resembles Dante's terza rima form without maintaining the standard interlocking rhyme scheme.[167]

There are several reasons why Walcott chose to use hexameters within such an elaborate and rigid structure, all of which are pertinent to my thesis. Most obviously, this is because he can. Walcott writing *Omeros* was a supremely talented poet looking to test his skill to the utmost. Like a mountaineer before a high peak, or a surfer eyeing the breakers in search of the perfect wave, he responds to the challenge because it is there. Fumagalli begins her essay 'A Caribbean Epic of the Self' with a quote from the last verse of Walcott's poem 'Sea Grapes':

> …and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough
> From whose groundswell the great hexameter come
> To the conclusions of exhausted surf.
> The classics can console. But not enough.[168]

Here, Walcott's sense of excitement at the possibilities the form has for him are palpable. It is the same joy and excitement at the apprehension of a chance to practice his skill that he expresses in *The Schooner Flight*:

> You ever look up from some lonely beach
> And see a far schooner? Well, when I write
> This poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,

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[166] Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 49. (From now on referred to as 'Fumagalli' with the page number).

[167] Hamner, *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic,* 237.

[168] Fumagalli, 187.

my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight.*[169]

This is as clear and formidable a statement of poetic intent as one could wish to see. There is another equally important reason why Walcott, a product of colonialism and a poet of the Caribbean periphery, would want to use this form. That is to consciously write back to his European counterparts, to let them know that in him, they have an equal. In *Omeros* Walcott appropriates the epic form for himself and his countrymen and shows himself to be so at home with the material that he can put his own Caribbean impress on it. Criticism is divided on whether or not *Omeros* is an epic, with many opponents being themselves Caribbean:

> To begin, even characterising the discussion of the poem's genre as a debate is an overstatement. Diverging opinions there have been, but little dialogue. Classicists like Mary Lefkowitz, Oliver Taplin, and Bernard Knox and Eurocentric comparatists like George Steiner have expressed little doubt about the poem's epic character. But Sidney Burris while hailing *Omeros* as a "sprawling new poem of "herculean ambition," pointedly avoids using the word "epic" calling *Omeros* a Caribbean "national narrative."[170]

There are good reasons why Walcott himself was disingenuously self-deprecating and obfuscatory about this. When questioned about the epic nature of *Omeros,* and about his choice of form, he often denied he had written an epic:

> Walcott's pointed objection to epic pretensions is in keeping with his reservations regarding history and art. As he explains in 'Reflections on *Omeros*', it is presumptuous for a writer to think that his work somehow elevates the ordinary.[171]

And yet that is just what *Omeros* does for the 'ordinary' men and women of the Antilles. To quote Fumagalli again:

> The heroes of *Omeros* are the seamen, waitresses, van-drivers and bar proprietors of his island – its common people with their everyday experience. The "local intensity" that Heaney praises so much in Dante is in fact one of the crucial characteristics of *Omeros.*[172]

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[169] Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight'* in *Derek Walcott: Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Baugh (London: Faber, 2009), 115.

[170] *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, 272.

[171] Hamner, *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic,* 237.

[172] Fumagalli, 195.

The struggle between the two fishermen, Achille and Hector, for the love of Helen; Ma Kilman's healing of Philoctete's wound; Achille's dream voyage to his African ancestor Afolabe; and Plunkett's discovery of his ancestral namesake, Midshipman Plunkett, all work not only on an everyday level but also on an elevated level as epic struggles against the tribulations of human existence. However, this cannot be achieved by narrative alone. It is the rhythm and the music of Walcott's verse that provides harmony and power to the narrative. For instance in Chapter II we are introduced to the blind poet Seven Seas who is a stand-in for Walcott and Homer:

> Seven Seas rose in the half-dark to make coffee.
> Sunrise was heating the ring of the horizon
> And clouds were rising like loaves. By the heat of the
>
> glowing iron rose he slid the saucepan's base on-
> to the ring and anchored it there. The saucepan shook
> from the weight of the water in it, then it settled.[173]

As usual Walcott sets the scene with a deceptively simple description full of sensuality, sound, colour and smell. Two words, 'rose' and 'half-dark' tell us all we need to know about the time, and the long lines with their assonances set off by the sibilant esses of Seven Seas and rose and the long 'ee' of coffee all convey the tranquillity of the dawn over the Ocean. The simile of 'clouds' and 'loaves' adds to this luxuriant feeling of warmth and well-being. The pun on 'rose' places the colour of dawn in the mind's eye of the reader. This feeling of warmth and comfort is heightened by the suggestion of the smell from roses and newly baked loaves. Then Walcott finds a way to please both eye and ear a stanza later, with the visual and aural echo of the 'glowing iron rose' of the cooking ring, which also presages the oppressive heat of the coming day. In the second stanza Walcott continues to use the assonance of the 's' and 'z' sound playing with the sonorous effects of 'rose', 'slid' 'saucepan' and 'base' to link the two stanzas musically but also to link the scene with the sea and fishing through the boat-like shape of the saucepan full of water which is 'anchored' on the ring.

Then there is the music of the *terza rima* floating through the stanzas. Walcott enjambs the last line of the stanza to link it with the next stanza but it has the pleasing effect of creating half-rhymes with 'Coffee' and 'the' and maintaining the hexametric feel of the verse.

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[173] Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber, 1990), 11, (II:ii:ll. 1-6). From now on *Omeros* with the page number.

There is no doubt that in Walcott's masterful hands the long lines and *terza rima* form are perfect vessels for narrative and epic where the poet is narrator but *Omeros* does not have much extended monologue. How do his long lines work when his characters speak? Further on in Chapter III, Ma Kilman, bar owner, wise woman and herbalist, is trying to remember a traditional African herb which would cure Philoctete's wound:

> "It have a flower somewhere, a medicine, and ways
> My grandmother would boil it. I used to watch ants
> Climbing her white flower-pot. But, God, in which place?"
>
> (III:iii)

Walcott manages to catch the rhythm and character of the Caribbean patois and to some extent the musicality even though the stanza does not rhyme either with its predecessor or successor.

I had already decided that my poem would use dramatic monologue, but my feeling was that a rigid metre did not work well with extended speech. While it might serve to catch the musicality of Caribbean voices it would not suit the South African voices that I wished to use. I think this is borne out by looking closely at Browning. I don't think the *The Ring and the Book* catches the speech rhythms of its Italian characters, who often sound like well-educated English men and women. Take this impassioned speech by Pompilia. She is lying on her death-bed recounting her relationship with her murderer/ husband, and how she rushed to the Bishop to plead for help:

> 'Place me in a convent,' I implored –
> 'Let me henceforward lead the virgin life
> You praise in Her you bid me imitate!'
> What did he answer? 'Folly of ignorance!
> Know, daughter, circumstances make or mar
> Virginity, - 't is virtue or 't is vice….'[174]

This is a fairly sophisticated argument, which does not have the ring of an illiterate Italian teenager trying to find a way to escape from the elderly husband she hates. I am not a Browning scholar, but I have come to think of *The Ring and the Book* as Browning's way of poeticising the dramatic events surrounding his elopement with Elizabeth Barrett, and the schism which ensued

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[174] Robert Browning, *The Ring And The Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 345, (VII:ll 752 – 6). From now on *The Ring and the Book* with the page number.

with her family, particularly her tyrannous father. So perhaps this use of English upper class voices is deliberate.

Both Pound and Eliot had an excellent ear for voices and the ability to reproduce the sound of a foreign voice in English. The opening stanzas of *The Waste Land* are too well known to need repetition but here is an example from the first of the 'Hell' *Cantos* of Pound talking about English politicians languishing in hell and mimicking the way Dante deals with Florentine politicians:

> Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto;
> The stench of wet coal, politicians
> …….e and …..n, their wrists bound to
> their ankles,
> Faces smeared on their rumps,
> wide eye on flat buttock,
> Bush hanging for beard,
> Addressing crowds through their arse-holes,[175]

According to Terrell, the men referred to are 'Lloyd George' and 'Wilson'.[176] Pound starts in Italian with a line from *The Inferno* to convey who it is who is speaking and where the action takes place and then switches to English, yet he still catches what he believes is the Tuscan poet's irascible nature and earthy vernacular in a way which sounds authentic to contemporary ears.

This was the problem that confronted me once I had made the decision to use dramatic monologue with a seven-line stanza: How could I be true to the voices of my speakers within the constraints of my chosen form? It takes me a while to find the voice of a speaker and decide when the monologue takes place, where the speaker is and who he or she is speaking to. I usually work by ear and read lines and stanzas out aloud to myself, adjusting the lines within the stanza. Only rarely do I scan a line. Problems frequently arise, and sometimes it takes me many months to resolve them.

I generally think of what the character is doing or the ideas he or she is trying to express and then spend a lot of time setting it down and trying to get the right sound and feel of the voice. I do this aurally by reading aloud to myself.

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[175] Ezra Pound, 'Canto XIV' from *Selected Cantos of Ezra Pound*, ed. Ezra Pound (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 31. (From now on, *Selected Cantos* with the page number).

[176] Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley [u.a.]: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 65.

The voice of the Prosecutor was relatively easy to catch because he is modelled on Doctor Percy Yutar, who comes from a similar background to me. The Judge was more difficult. Both men were lawyers and both deeply religious, familiar with the Old Testament, with Latin and with the works of Roman authors like Cicero. Yutar was, according to several observers of the trial, extremely self-important and notable for his florid and sometimes obsequious phraseology.[177] Both speak English with strong South African accents. In Stanza 9 of his monologue, the Prosecutor is recalling his objection to the Judge when the veracity of one of his police witnesses is challenged by the defence:

9.
'I had to clarify my man's testimony,
"Your Honour," I said "the witness is a policeman
A servant of the state. He would not lie
He would not defile the sanctity of a Court
With a conman's treacherous tongue
There is too much disrespect in this court
For those who dutifully serve the people.'"

Here I used four and five beat lines with as little enjambment as possible, none in this stanza. I also rely a good deal on assonance and alliteration to reinforce the effect of the serpent metaphor. In this stanza the repetition of the 's' sound in; 'servant of the state', *sanctity*, *disrespect* and *serve*, give the stanza a hissing, snake-like diction which goes with the alliteration of 'treacherous tongue'. (It is also deeply ironic because the South African security police were notorious for their own snake-like tongues – for falsifying testimony.)

In stanza 22, when the Prosecutor has a spiritual crisis and is recalling his address in court, but arguing with his conscience, a different treatment was necessary:

22.
'But surely we are the agents of mercy
If we men of faith strain to be merciful
What rain can fall on this fragile land?
The salt winds will blow and the desert

[177] See Joel Joffe and Hilda Bernstein's comments on him in their respective books on the trial.

Drive back the green fields. The crops
Will fail and where the sweet meadow
Blossomed, the hyenas will stalk.'

Here, where he gives vent to his fears, his speech becomes more imaginative and full of metaphor, with references to Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Old Testament and to African myth. In passages like this where the speech becomes almost visionary, I use much more enjambment (three separate occasions here) because the thought cannot be contained within the line.

Finding the Judge's voice posed a different set of problems. Although the Judge and the Prosecutor are both lawyers and religious men and versed in the speech patterns of the court, they come from completely different social backgrounds. I give the Judge a different diction to the Prosecutor. He uses many more Afrikaans words and phrases and a much heavier five beat line as in:

'To portray the accused as a grave threat

To the safety and stability of our fatherland'

Or here:

'Have you been into the forest Prosecutor?
I doubt it. You are a man of the city

Not a son of the veld and the vlei'

One of the sections which caused me most trouble was the Judge repeating back to the Prosecutor the arguments for and against the capital punishment from a case the prosecutor had previously argued (stanzas 14 – 20). In these stanzas I put forward an argument against capital punishment through a Muslim jurist who is based on the South African jurist and former head of the Constitutional Court, Ismail Mahomed and using arguments which he used in an actual case which I had researched.[178] It was difficult to make the three voices distinctive, particularly as their words are repeated by the Judge in an almost mocking tone back to the Prosecutor:

16.
'Mahomed reminded us that life is sacred

[178] Jayaram, N. 'Its Twenty Years since a Great Anti-Death Penalty Judgment'. Open Democracy, 20 June 2015. https://www.opendemocracy.net/n-jayaram/it-is-20-years-since-great-antideath-penalty-judgement . Accessed on 3/3/2017.

In all our religions. "The state," he said
"Has a duty to preserve the lives of its people
Not to destroy them. The deliberate annihilation
Of life, is in itself a crime against humanity
By this long delayed and irreversible act
We usurp the power of our Creator"'

I wanted to catch something of Mohammed's sonorous diction, and so used phrases like 'deliberate annihilation of life' rather than some shorter formulaic phrase like 'the death penalty' as well as long flowing lines:

"Clemency," Mahomed said, "Is a sweet fountain of wisdom

From which Judges should drink often"

I could have stopped the line after 'fountain,' but I wanted 'sweet fountain of wisdom' to be said in one breath and then a pause. Generally, I try to avoid enjambment particularly if the result is to break up the following line in an awkward way, which can often look and sound forced and untrue to the speaker's diction.

As I wrote the poem to be performed, the place where the natural breath is taken is often important in determining the line length. Gizzi, in his introduction to the recently re-published volume of Prynne's *The White Stones* (which contains Prynne's climate change mini-epic 'The Glacial Question, Unsolved'), had this to say about breath and line-length, making reference to the American poet Charles Olson, who Prynne regards as a major influence:

> For this reason, it is worth rehearsing the system that Olson proposed for an emancipatory poetics in his now venerable but still relevant essay "Projective Verse." As Olson had it:
>
> ….The two halves are:
>
> the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
>
> the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE
>
> Olson further elucidates: "I am dogmatic that the head shows in the syllable. The dance of the intellect…" and goes on to say, "And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but the LINE?"

> The line in *The White Stones* works both at the line break and in the clausal phrases that keep the machine humming and dancing from one idea to the next one, subject to the next while constantly opening the horizon of meaning that each poem proposes.[179]

Although my style of writing is a world away from Prynne and perhaps even further from Olson, that explanation by Gizzi seemed to me to convey a good understanding of my own practice with regard to the importance of the breath.

When it came to writing 'Drum' I had to develop a different idiolect. The speaker is a hip young journalist speaking to me in 1987/1988, ten years after the murder of Stephen Biko. Biko was six years older than me. When I went to Wits as an undergraduate in 1970 he was in the process of forming SASO, the black students union which broke away from the main white dominated students union NUSAS. During my first two years, I was very involved in student politics. I was invited to attend a joint conference of SASO and NUSAS at which Biko spoke but for reasons I now forget, I was unable to go, something I now deeply regret.

'Drum' is street-smart and highly literate. The South African townships have their own idiolect, much like cockney rhyming slang, which is almost incomprehensible to outsiders. Dictionaries are available for it. I have tried to pick up the rhythm of that without trying to write in the idiolect, which I felt would sound artificial in my hands. Here he is rebuking me for my white Jewish arrogance:

> 7.
> 'You guys think you are the chosen people
> Don't shake your head at me
> I can see it in your eyes and lips
> in the offer of your hand
> and the confident way you stand
> But you are as deluded as the Boers
> who claim this land in God's name.'

'Drum' uses many colloquialisms and slang. He changes pace with long and short lines and uses many rhymes and half-rhymes; 'hand', 'stand' 'land', 'head', 'deluded', 'claim' and 'name'. His

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[179] P. Gizzi, introduction to *The White Stones* by J. H. Prynne, New York Review Books Poets (New York: New York Review Books, 2016), ix.

anger at the oppression and inequality he suffers is palpable. Because he talks in short sharp bursts, it is rarely necessary to enjamb.

If I were asked then what my practice is and how I set about filling the vessel of the seven-line stanza with lines of different length, I would have to say, with Pound and Eliot, that while I feel free to make a line as long or as short as circumstances require. In other-words, I write *vers libre* because I must:

> I think one should write *vers libre* only when one "must," that is to say, only when the "thing" builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the "thing," more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse; a rhythm which discontents one with set iambic or set anapaestic.
>
> . . .
>
> Eliot said the thing very well when he said, "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job."[180]

Like the proverbial piece of string, my line length is neither fixed nor free but is determined by the interplay of many factors. Although one of the hall marks of the classical epic style is grandiloquent diction, this should feel natural in the poem because of the nature of the subject matter or the character who is speaking. You don't expect anything else in *Paradise Lost*. But sometimes its use is achieved by artificial means - through the use of deliberate archaisms or odd grammatical structures. Pound sometimes resorts to this strategy, as in Canto I:

> The ocean flowing backward, came we then to the place
> Aforesaid by Circe.
> Here they did rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,
> And drawing sword from my hip
> I dug the ell-square pitkin;
> Poured we libations unto each the dead,
> First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.[181]
>
> (Canto I:18-24)

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[180] From the Poetry Foundation Web Page "'A Retrospect" and "A Few Don'ts" (1918),' by Ezra Pound https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69409 accessed on 16/5/2017.

[181] Ezra Pound, 'Canto I' (ll.,18 – 24), *The Cantos of Ezra Pound.* (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp.], 1993), 3.

Here 'came we', 'Aforesaid', and 'Poured we' seem like clumsy attempts to add antiquity and grandeur, like an antique dealer trying to distress a piece of reproduction furniture. I think he does himself a disservice. I have only used this where the circumstance requires it and always try to let the characters speak with their natural rhythms and diction.

Punctuation

'Rivonia' has been written to be performed as well as read, to return to or at least pay respects to the orality of epic. My intention is that the poem must feel good and true coming off the tongue. That to me is more important than how it looks on the page. I have performed 'The Prosecutor retires to his study' and 'In the Judge's Chambers' several times and found that in rehearsal I would mark up my reading copy in a different way to the way I had originally punctuated it. My approach to punctuation is therefore unashamedly idiosyncratic, based on a desire to keep the punctuation loose in order to give room to a reader to find his or her own interpretations and rhythms. I am also a great believer in the natural punctuation of the line break. As John Lennard observes in *the Poetry Handbook*:

> Christopher Ricks once offered this rule-of-thumb: that whereas prose must go to the end of the line, in poetry it's an option – that is, poetry uses one additional form of punctuation, the line-break, a moment of spatial organisation different from every mark and other space.[182]

I like to let the line break work for me and try not to punctuate at the end of a line unless it is necessary, for instance if the line ends with a question or an exclamation. Often, I like to capitalise the first letter of a line if it is naturally a new sentence, but if it feels possible for it to be a continuation of the previous line, then I use lower case. I do however put a full stop at the end of each stanza. I appreciate that this approach can seem somewhat offhand and may lead to ambiguities of interpretation but I don't see this as a great concern. Below are two versions of the stanza 21 from 'the Epilogue'. The first version is fully punctuated, the second more loosely so:

> 'The reek of it. All foul and loathsome.
> Like some sacrifice before the golden calf.

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[182] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism*. 2. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 153.

The children of Israel dancing round the altar
misled by false prophets, and the priest,
his white robes blotched with red,
holding up the dripping knife as he calls
on the god for a favourable harvest.'

'The reek of it. All foul and loathsome
like some sacrifice before the golden calf
The children of Israel dancing round the altar
misled by false prophets, and the priest
his white robes blotched with red
holding up the dripping knife as he calls
on the god for a favourable harvest.'

The unpunctuated second version allows the reader some freedom of emphasis to read 'All foul and loathsome like some sacrifice before the golden calf' as one line and then pause for effect after 'calf'. The line break provides natural pause after 'priest' and 'red' with no need for commas which clutter up the page. The penultimate line of the stanza is enjambed, but the reader has the discretion to make the briefest of pauses. My preference is for the second version.

The voices I chose for 'Rivonia'

Identifying the voices I wanted to use was difficult. Some, like 'The Prosecutor' and 'The Judge', were easy and obvious. Others came after much thought. When I began writing 'Rivonia', I used actual names but after a while I felt uneasy about this and began to refer to them in generic terms as 'The Prosecutor' or 'The Judge' or 'The Prisoner's Wife'. There were good reasons for doing this. Although many of the characters are readily identifiable, I do not want anyone to think I am writing biography or history or that I am 'putting words into people's mouths'. But as I progressed, I realised that the characters had become more than their individual selves, they had become representatives of the many peoples of South Africa. I also became more aware of the orality of my poem and that I was writing it for performance and not just for the page, and this pleased me, because it fitted in well with my desire to write an epic poem and with the classical idea of *epos*.

Browning had a similar problem. Even though the characters on whom he based the voices in *The Ring and the Book* had been dead for over a hundred years, he was still accused of bending the truth and manipulating real individuals. How much more difficulty would I get into if I invented dialogues with people who were famous in their life-time, and led well remembered and well documented lives? Furthermore, using a generic term gave me freedom to invent incidents, to re-imagine history and to create amalgams of different people.

On my supervisor's suggestion, each speaker is introduced by the poet with a short epigraph of two or three stanzas to convey the time and place, say something about the speaker, or allude to parallels in other epic poems which I want the audience to attend to.

'Prologue – *Izibongo AmaXhosa*'

Browning begins *The Ring and the Book* with a prologue. In it he describes the chance finding of 'the Old Yellow Book' in a Florentine market and how he came upon the narratives which he uses in his poem. His prologue also provides a summary of the overall story and introduces his speakers. I follow his model and also begin 'Rivonia' with a prologue spoken by the poet which sets the scene, and in which I introduce myself and the speakers, who I call witnesses. I have called my prologue *Izibongo AmaXhosa* which means praise song for the Xhosa people partly to honour the major role taken by Xhosa men and women in the bringing about of change in South Africa, and partly in deference to the Xhosa tradition of praise poetry which I discuss later in this commentary. I must again emphasise that although my speakers are easily identifiable by anyone with even a small knowledge of contemporary South African history, they are not entirely based

on that person. Sometimes the witnesses are amalgams of several people. Sometimes I make use of incidents which occurred in other people's lives or I use imagined incidents. 'Rivonia' is a poem, not a history or a biography.

In the prologue, I also talk about life in South Africa under apartheid as well as my own connections with the narratives. The time of 'The Prologue' is May 1974. This was an important time for me because I had fled South Africa some eight months previously and was making my way overland to Katmandu. I was staying at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which gave free accommodation to travellers. It was here that I had something of an epiphany, and I began to feel the grip which apartheid had on my psyche, start to loosen. Thengani Ngwenya puts it in this way in an essay on Black Consciousness Poetry :

> Essentially the ideology of apartheid and the discriminatory legislation it spawned negated the humanity of all South Africans regardless of race. Biko understood the inherently demeaning and emotionally corrosive effect of the apartheid ideology on the psyche of all South Africans.[183]

One of the tragic consequences of colonialism and the apartheid regime in South Africa was the neglect, if not active suppression, of the great tradition of black poetry and storytelling which was both oral and written. In his autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom,* Mandela relates how he heard the great Xhosa poet (*imbongi)* Krune Mqhayi recite while he was at college and the abiding influence it had on him:

> We rose to our feet clapping and cheering. I did not want ever to stop applauding. I felt such intense pride at that point, not as an African but as a Xhosa; I felt like one of the chosen people. . . . I saw that an African might stand his ground with a white man, yet I was still eagerly seeking benefits from whites, which often required subservience.[184]

But this was in 1937, when there was still a flourishing press publishing in Xhosa. By 1970 when I was at university this had virtually died out, it was not widely known except to the specialist and difficult for white South Africans to obtain, even in translation. I only came across the Zulu

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[183]Thengani H. Ngwenya, 'Black Consciousness Poetry: writing against apartheid'. In *The Cambridge History of South African Literature,* David Attwell and Derek Attridge, eds., (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 501, (http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521199285 accessed on 2/12/2015).

[184] Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Little Brown and Company, 1994), 40.

poet Msizi Kunene, author of the Zulu epic poem *Emperor Shaka The Great,*[185] in 2016 while doing research for this dissertation.

Zulu and Xhosa epic developed from the tradition of praise poetry. Kunene believes that during the period of the warrior king Shaka:

> Zulu literature changed to become a powerful vehicle of social and political ideas. The heroic epic was developed, the language-form changing in the process to express dramatic national events.[186]

It was by chance, while browsing through the SOAS library as I was doing research into Xhosa (the tribe of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu) myth, that I came across Opland's book *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*. Through him, I became aware of the Xhosa tradition of praise singing and poetry which I was completely ignorant of. His summary of this tradition on the rear-cover of his book *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* says this:

> The Xhosa-speaking peoples who settled along the south-eastern seaboard of South Africa [the Transkei and Ciskei] promoted traditions of praise poetry (*izibongo*), poetry produced orally by men and women, adults and children, about people, clans, ancestors and animals. Throughout the nineteenth century, authors who used the Xhosa language gradually developed the craft of composing poetry for publication in newspapers and expanded this process in the twentieth century, when books containing secular literature appeared, but the practice of oral poetry persists, flourishing now as it did before the incursion of colonial settlers. The dominant poet in the community is the *imbongi* who continues to produce poetry praising or criticising figures of authority on occasions of local and national significance.[187]

It is a matter of great regret that I did not get to know about this while I was living in South Africa. I can only put this down to the barriers which apartheid imposed. This tradition, and Opland's excellent translations of the work of Xhosa *iimbongi,* and in particular D.L.P. Yali-Manisi, have been immensely influential on the style and composition of 'Rivonia' and I am most grateful to him for this work and for discussing it with me.

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[185] Banned in South Africa. Published in America in English translation in 1979, and only published in South Africa in the original Zulu in 2017, 10 years after the poet's death.

[186] Mazisi Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic*, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works (London [etc.]: Heinemann, 1979), xxv.

[187] Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*, Second edition, (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017). From now on referred to as '*Xhosa Poets and Poetry*' with the page reference.

I begin the Prologue of 'Rivonia' by imitating the style of the Xhosa praise singer. I start with two words in Xhosa. 'Letshitshiba! Le-tshi-tshi-ba!'. These are taken from Yali-Manisi's poem on Nongqawuse, the prophetess who instigated the infamous cattle killing of 1857, which Yali-Manisi extemporised for Opland in 1970. In his retelling of this and his translation of the poem, Opland says that this word: '"Letshitshiba' has no meaning but is merely a nonce exclamation to attract attention."[188] This call by the poet for attention from his audience seemed to me to be an excellent way to begin 'Rivonia'. For many years my family holidayed in the Transkei and I remember listening to Xhosa storytellers with fascination. Although I never understood more than a few words of Xhosa, I nevertheless feel close enough to the tradition to borrow from it. But it also reminded me of another oral poet from an entirely different tradition on the other side of the world: the *Beowulf* poet starts his epic with the word 'Hwaet', which is also untranslatable but is often rendered as a call for attention.[189]

I end my poem by emulating words of praise and awe from William Blake. I have used the metre and rhythm of 'Jerusalem' to write my own words of praise for Mandela. It seems to me that Blake's words fit the man and that there was no person better placed to speak (or sing) Blake's poem than Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

'Makhanda's Prophecy'

Mandela had many predecessors on Robben Island which was often used by the British, who ruled South Africa from 1802 to 1961, to imprison those who rebelled against them. In 1979, Tokyo M. G. Sexwale, a fellow prisoner of Mandela, wrote this verse about it:

> Deep into the icy waters of the Atlantic
> Somewhere around the Cape of Storms
> encaged by rocky beaches all around
> assaulted by piercing winds from the Benguela
> like an abandoned ship…lies the Island of the damned[190]

Makhanda (1780 – 1820) was a Xhosa prophet who masterminded and led an attack on the British and Boer settlers at Grahamstown in April 1819. The Xhosa were heavily defeated.

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[188] *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* 35.

[189] 'Hwaet' is translated by Michael Alexander as 'Attend!', (*Beowulf* (Penguin Books, 1973)); by Seamus Heaney as 'So.', (*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2001)) and by Chris McCully as non-exclamatory and non-imperative 'Hear [from yesterday…]', (*Beowulf,* Carcanet Classics, 2018)).

[190] Tokyo Sexwale, 'Island of the Damned' from *Voices from Robben Island* , Nelson Mandela, Jurgen Schadeberg, and Mary Benson, eds., (Randburg, South Africa: Ravan Press, 1994).

Makhanda escaped, but later surrendered to the British in the hope that this would stop the persecution of the Xhosa people. His recompense for this selfless attempt to bring peace to the Eastern Frontier was imprisonment on Robben Island.

On 25th December 1820, Makhanda and several fellow prisoners made a dramatic attempt to escape. The prisoners broke out of their cell blocks, commandeered several whaling boats and set off for the mainland. But Makhanda's boat had an inexperienced crew and it capsized in heavy surf. Legend has it that he was last seen clinging to a rock urging his companions on. As the historian Julia C. Wells says:

> Makhanda's life and his escape from imprisonment on Robben Island has indeed become a potent symbol of the true freedom fighter's commitment even to die fighting for the cause.[191]

Makhanda became a symbol of hope and an inspiration for prisoners on the island. Mandela and Sisulu called the teaching and discussion group they established 'Makhanda's University' and there was a Makhanda FC football team.

In order to fit within 'Rivonia', Makhanda's monologue is epistolary. It is in the form of an imagined letter to his people taken down by a companion and transcribed into English. Although Wells believes that Makhanda did speak some English, he would probably have addressed his people in Xhosa. Wells' research shows that there were prisoners on Robben Island who spoke Xhosa and could also write in English. Therefore the device is not too far-fetched. The letter is dictated to one of these men immediately prior to the break out.

'The Prosecutor Retires to his Study'

The character of the Prosecutor is based on Dr Percy Yutar (1911 – 2002), who was prosecuting counsel at the Rivonia Trial. The Prosecutor's monologue is delivered in his study late in April 1964. Like the Pope's monologue in Book X of *The Ring and the Book,* Yutar does not have a listener. It is therefore fair to say that this is more an interior monologue than a dramatic monologue.

He is reviewing the proceedings of the court and the guilty verdict passed by the Judge and is preparing his speech on sentencing. Even though the defendants have only been convicted of sabotage not treason, it is his intention to ask for the death penalty. This is what he feels is

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[191] Julia C. Wells, *The Return of Makhanda: Exploring the Legend*, Thinking Africa (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012), 17.

politically expedient and is what his superiors and the majority of the ruling white population of the country desire. However, like the story of the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac), where Abraham is unable to slay Isaac, the Prosecutor finds he is unable to do this for mysterious reasons. He is haunted by a terrible dream based on an incident in his youth when he lost the fingers of his left hand in an accident with a mincing machine in his father's butcher shop. This leads to an epiphany and he decides on a different course of action.

'In the Judge's Chambers'

This character of the Judge is based on Justice Quartus de Wet (1899 – 1980), who was the judge in the Rivonia trial. He came from a highly regarded Afrikaner family. His grandparents on both sides participated in the Great Trek. His father Nicholas Jacobus de Wet was a general in the Boer war, did his legal training at Cambridge and later became Attorney General of the Union of South Africa. The defence attorneys in the Rivonia trial regarded Quartus de Wet as a fair and independently minded man, who would brook no political interference in his court. However, at the same time he had all the prejudices of his race and background. The Judge draws on the history of his family, its struggles in the Boer War, and a deep spirituality in explaining his decision not to pass the death sentence.

The Judge's monologue is delivered to the Prosecutor in the Judge's chambers on or around 12th June 1964, in the morning before the business of the court begins.

'Drum'

Drum magazine is a South African family magazine aimed at a black readership:

> In 2005 it was described as "the first black lifestyle magazine in Africa", but it is noted chiefly for its early 1950s and 1960s reportage of township life under Apartheid.[192]

Although it was founded by white publishers (among them the English journalist and historian Anthony Sampson) it was unique in hiring black journalists, including Nadazana (Nat) Nakasa (1937 – 1965). At the time in which 'Rivonia' is set, it delivered a mixture of lurid headlines, sensationalist gossip and incisive political and anti-apartheid reporting. It was immensely popular and hated by the government, issues were often banned.

In 'Rivonia', my conversation with the journalist 'Drum' who works for the magazine and who attended the Rivonia Trial takes place in about October 1978 in the aftermath of the

[192] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drum_(South_African_magazine), accessed on 16th February 2016.

Soweto Riots. I had returned to South Africa for a holiday and found changes appearing even though apartheid was still in full swing. I went to a party near Pretoria where black people and white people were mixing freely and dancing with each other - something unheard of when I left South Africa in 1973. I met a black student of my age and struck up a conversation of sorts. Free it may have seemed, but I still found myself unable to form friendships across the colour bar on anything like a normal footing. The impossibility of relating to people other than on a master/servant basis, one of the main reasons I left South Africa, was still very much evident. It is true that some people had different experiences; the journalist Fergal Keane claims many black friends from that period.[193]

My conversation with Drum is imagined. It covers the period from the raid on Lillieshall Farm to the death of Stephen Biko in September 1977. It provides a commentary on the action in the trial and the political background on the streets, much as Browning does in *The Ring and The Book,* with his sections; 'Half-Rome', 'The Other Half-Rome' and 'Tertium Quid'. I have based Drum on the journalists Nat Nakasa and Can Themba, and on the photojournalist Sam Nzima, who took the famous photo of the dying Hector Pieterson at the start of the Soweto Riots in 1976. Drum speaks in the hip journalistic style of Nakasa and the style of two contemporary black poets, Mongane Wally Serote and Lesego Rampolokeng. He has a trickster's voice, full of mockery and bitter humour. This is in sharp contrast to the prophetic and visionary voice of the Albertina Sisulu-like character in the section 'The Mother of the Nation Laments'. Drum's political outlook is hostile and at odds with the ANC policy. It is similar to the Black Consciousness views of the student activist and political leader Steven Biko. In writing, I drew a great deal on the collection of Biko's writings in *I Write What I Like.* It is for this reason that I have dedicated the poem to Biko.

'The Mother of the Nation Laments'

The character of this speaker is based on Albertina Sisulu (1918 – 2011). Both she and Winnie Mandela were given the title of Mother of the Nation as an accolade. Albertina was in many ways the antithesis of Winnie and she was by any account an extraordinary woman. One of five children, she had to bring up her siblings because of their mother's illness. She qualified as a nurse and became an activist early on. She married Nelson Mandela's friend and co-defendant Walter Sisulu and remained devoted to him throughout his imprisonment. She was a trade

[193] Fergal Keane, *The Bondage of Fear: A Journey Through the Last White Empire* (London: Penguin, 1995).

unionist, a formidable organiser and anti-apartheid activist but still managed to raise 6 children and foster 3 more.

The Mother of the Nation speaks to me, the poet, from beyond death. Like Dante's conversation with Ser Brunetto Latino in Canto XV of *The Inferno* (or the Tralfamadorians of Slaughterhouse 5), she sees the future and the past simultaneously and comments on both. In a way this section of 'Rivonia' is my own journey into the underworld, but in a South African sense. Communication with ancestors and with the spirits of the dead are an important part of Bantu religious beliefs:

> Besides this relationship in language, all the Bantu have many customs and beliefs in common. All of them, have more or less vaguely, the idea of one God, though some of them do not distinguish him from the sky or the sun, or even from the first ancestor of the tribe. They believe in survival after death and think that the ghosts of the dead can interfere to almost any extent in the affairs of the living.[194]

I use 'Mother' to comment on all of the other narrators, on the political background, as Browning does ('half Rome' and 'The other half Rome' in Books I and II of *The Ring and the Book,* and as Dante does). Mother also comments on the many cruelties visited on the black people of South Africa by the apartheid regime. I imagine her visionary nature as enabling her to see across time and to the pre-history of Southern Africa which was home to some of the most ancient hominid societies. The section on the descent of the priestess into the 'cave of the dead' is based on the reports of the discoveries in the Naledi cave system, which revealed the existence of a new species of hominid of incredible antiquity and the practice of some forms of burial rite approximately 250,000 years ago.[195]

'The Prison Warden'

The Prison Warden is based on the characters of several prison wardens on Robben Island. Some of them are mentioned in Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom.* Others like Christo Brand and James Gregory (1941 – 2003) have written their own accounts of their association and friendship with Mandela. The monologue is spoken to me, the poet, on February 11th 1990, on the eve of Mandela's release from prison, as the speaker watches the television footage of Mandela emerging from Victor Verster prison and being met by Winnie

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[194] Alice Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (Bibliobazaar, 2007 (1932)), 18.

[195] Homo Naledi – Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_naledi accessed on many occasions.

Mandela. This was a pivotal event in South African history and is one of the key events in 'Rivonia'. It was watched by many South Africans both in the country and in exile.

The Prison Warden comes from a completely different social and political background to the Judge, one of virulent Afrikaner nationalism. In the monologue he discusses his childhood and young adulthood, how he becomes disillusioned with this form of nationalism and is rejected by his family, and how he gets to know and respect Mandela and his companions. As a result, he comes to believe that a new and better future for South Africa, based on the ANC charter, is possible.

'One of those Commies'

The intention of this monologue is to celebrate and say something about the white activists and resistors to apartheid of whom there were many. Among the best known are Joe Slovo, who became a minister in the first ANC government, and his wife Ruth First, who was assassinated by a letter bomb in Maputo in August 1982.

The epigraph in the monologue alludes to a section in book XV of *The Iliad* where the Trojans, rallying under Hector, drive the Greeks back to their ships and attack the fortifications which the Greeks have constructed.

The speaker in the monologue is based on Slovo and First's great friend and ANC colleague Harold Wolpe (1926 – 1996). Wolpe was a white Jewish lawyer, a communist and a member of the ANC. He was arrested shortly after the Lillieshall Farm raid. He did not stand trial because he and a fellow defendant, Arthur Goldreich, made a dramatic escape from jail, managed to evade detection and flee across the border into Botswana. Finally, after many adventures and mishaps, they reached Addis Ababa. Wolpe settled in the United Kingdom and became Professor of Sociology at Essex University. He remained a leading anti-apartheid intellectual and communist theorist and had a great deal of influence on the development of the ANC during the years when its members were in exile.

In 'Rivonia' this speaker is in dialogue with his wife, after he (like the 'Prison Warden') has watched the television broadcast of Nelson Mandela emerging from prison. He is convinced that change must now come to South Africa and that he needs to be there to participate. His wife is reluctant. She has established a career for herself in England and worries that there will be nothing for her in the 'new' South Africa. She is also resentful of the personal and emotional cost to the family of her husband's lifelong activism.

'The Prisoner's Wife'

This speaker is based on Winnie Mandela (1936 -2018). The choice of a speaker based on Winnie was a difficult one. She was a formidable woman of immense courage, determination and strength of mind. I thought of using her as a model from the outset, but changed my mind partly because I thought I could not write about her in her lifetime, and partly because I was afraid of confronting her and did not think I could do her justice. 'Rivonia' needed another female voice and I thought of using 'Ruth First' or the Afrikaner poet, Ingrid Jonker, but they were not right. In the end, I returned to Winnie who had recently died.

I chose the passage from Macbeth as an epigraph because I think there are comparisons to be made between the character of Lady Macbeth and that of Winnie Mandela. Both hungered for power, both were revolutionary and would stop at nothing to achieve their ends. Lady Macbeth succeeded in convincing Macbeth to use violence to overthrow the regime, Winnie Mandela was not able to persuade Nelson Mandela to take a hard line against the apartheid regime.

The Prisoner's Wife talks to the poet about her life, her thoughts and fears as she waits for her husband to emerge from prison (11th February 1990) and anticipates how they will recommence life together having been forcibly separated for 27 years. She is forthright about the hardships she has suffered while he has been in prison and believes her role as standard bearer for the ANC has not been acknowledged or sufficiently appreciated. She is also aware that certain events (in particular her extramarital affairs and her role in the murder of Stompie Moketsie) could if they became widely known, harm her relationship with her husband and possibly have an impact on their political futures. They could also do great damage to the ANC and the cause of freedom in South Africa. She considers how she is going to manage this and what she is prepared to reveal about it.

Epilogue - 'The Reverend Maimela composes his eulogy'

This speaker is based on two characters, one real and one fictional. The fictional character is the Reverend Stephen Kumalo who is the central character of Alan Paton's novel *Cry the Beloved Country,* which I believe is one of the greatest novels to have come out of South Africa. It was the first novel I ever read which had a black person as its central character and which accurately portrayed the plight of black people in South Africa. I was delighted when I was doing the research for this section to discover that Paton had based the character of Kumalo on the priest Leo Rakale, a highly respected and politically active black monk whom Desmond Tutu appointed as a sub-dean on his appointment as Bishop of St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. This, I felt, allowed me to introduce Tutu into the poem as a character and write about his role

in opposing apartheid. The other person I based the character of the speaker on was Reverend Simon Maimela, a Lutheran minister and author of the book of essays called *Proclaim Freedom to my Country* who I discuss in more detail below in the section on cultural appropriation. The epigraph I chose is from *Beowulf* because it speaks of the fear of the forces of chaos and destruction which will descend after the death of the beloved leader.

I have situated the speaker in a little church in the Khundulu valley near to where the Xhosa *imbongi* David Livingstone Yali-Manisi lived. I was attracted to this location because it is mentioned twice by Opland in his book *The Dassie and the Hunter: A South African Meeting* about his relationship with Yali-Manisi and I wanted to find a way of bringing Yali-Manisi into 'Rivonia'. There is something deeply moving and South African about Opland's description of this church:

> The Khundulu valley stretched beyond in a vista so striking that I stopped to take a photograph…Further along stands a church built in the shape of a Xhosa dwelling, a one-roomed hut with circular wall built from sun-dried mud bricks around a lattice of laths and topped with a conical thatched roof. The church is cool and clean and echoes to the footstep, empty and hollow each time I have entered it. It sits at the foot of the mountain, over which the road rises through twists and turns to Lady Frere – now known by its Xhosa name of Cacadu once again….[196]

This seemed to me to be a suitable place for someone to compose a eulogy for Nelson Mandela, and in a sense forms a pleasing circularity as earlier in the poem, the Prosecutor spoke as he was composing his closing plea to the court on the sentence of Mandela and his comrades.

This monologue is a mixture of Xhosa praise song, elegy and political comment. In it, the speaker reviews how Mandela has affected him, the changes in South Africa up to Mandela's death and predicts that Mandela will become a mythical figure.

Nelson Mandela – the absent presence

Although Mandela is the hero of 'Rivonia' he does not appear as a speaker in the poem. This is somewhat unusual for an epic poem. The only times we hear something of what he says are in the 'Drum' section when the speaker quotes from Mandela's famous speech to the court at the Rivonia trial, and in 'The Prison Warden' where he speaks to the warden.

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[196] Jeff Opland, *The Dassie And The Hunter: A South African Meeting,* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), 80.

There are several reasons why I felt it inappropriate to have Mandela as a speaker. Perhaps most important is that his life is too recent and too well recorded for a monologue with him to be imagined. There are several biographies, memoirs and volumes of collected correspondence already published. What more could I add? It would be virtually impossible for me to construct a monologue without being accused, with some justification, of distorting the truth. I soon realised that I could achieve a heroic mythologization of Mandela by looking at him through the eyes of other people and having them talk about their role in the struggle against apartheid and how their interaction with him affected them and their actions.

Another potent argument against using him as a speaker was that while his public utterance was historically and politically interesting, it was not necessarily poetically interesting, or relevant to an epic poem. Mandela's stoicism, his patience throughout the long years of incarceration, his willingness to forgive his captors and oppressors and to work with them to build a better South Africa, were all well known. What I thought was not well known and had not really been dealt with, was the effect he had on other people. He seemed to possess an astonishing, almost instinctive, ability to win people over to his side, to inspire friendship and unshakeable loyalty and to make people behave better than they otherwise would. A good example of this was the way he befriended the captain of the South African rugby team, Francois Pienaar, in the finals of the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

The classic epic hero triumphs by skill in battle. Virgil starts *The Aeneid* with the words, 'I sing of Arms and the man.' It seemed to me that the battle for minds and emotions of South Africans which Mandela engaged in with such skill, would be better shown in dramatic monologue by having other speakers talk about their encounters and associations with Mandela and how this affected them. By making Mandela an absent presence, 'Rivonia' enables the man to develop a heroic mystique, in a way that would otherwise be difficult, without slipping into self-aggrandisement and hagiography.

Problems with using dramatic monologue as an epic form

In addition to the various problems inherent in attempting to write an epic poem, using dramatic monologue as a form gave rise to several specific problems. These include: cultural appropriation, speaking for others (prosopopoeia), pastiche and lack of authority. In this section I will analyse the way these problems affect 'Rivonia', and say how I have dealt with them and why I feel that what I have written is justifiable.

Cultural appropriation and speaking for others (prosopopoeia)

In 'Rivonia' I borrow from Bantu myth and make use of the imagery and rhythm of Bantu praise poems and the sound, texture and vocabulary of black voices. I also use Afrikaner voices, stories and folk-tales. I place these alongside and on equal footing with Biblical and Classical myth, imagery, vocabulary and style. In choosing my voices or witnesses, I take voices, narratives, myths and material from other cultures and more particularly from Xhosa culture and use them for my own purposes. I speak through speakers of different gender or race or class. Although, as many critics acknowledge, in a dramatic monologue the reader, 'should not conflate poet with speaker',[197] nevertheless my usage amounts to cultural appropriation.

Although African American popular culture differs somewhat from South African popular culture, the concept of cultural appropriation can be more readily understood by drawing on examples from black experience in America. In the preface to *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture* one of the editors, Baruti N. Kopano provides a cutting description of the practice:

> . . . appropriation denotes taking possession of something that one has no right to, and misrepresentation refers to the deliberate, typically negative, depiction of a false ideal. Both can relate to commodification or turning something of inherent value into an instrument for monetary gain.[198]

The various essays in the book survey a wide range of cultural media including music such as hip hop and rap, film, popular dance, television, fashion and comic books where, as Baruti says, 'white America's appropriation misrepresentation, and commodification of black cultural

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[197] *Dramatic Monologue*, 12.

[198] Kopano, Baruti N., and Tamara Brown, eds, *Soul Thieves: The Appropriation and Misrepresentation of African American Popular Culture,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), viii. From now on *Soul Thieves* with the page reference.

expression has been significant.'[199] Baruti and his co-essayists present strong evidence showing that white American commercial experience and the predominance of white capital is so pervasive that it holds a virtual monopoly on publication and performance. The result is that genres and styles of music, song lyrics, poetry, writing and fashion are changed, altered or diluted to be more acceptable to white taste. A form of cultural colonialism has developed which, while it cannot be said to actively suppress black culture, robs it of its soul. As Tamara Brown, Baruti's co-editor, explains:

> "Soul" in the African American vernacular, similar to spiritual references is the essence of being and essential to being. It is one cultural factor that links the black community. The appropriation and/or misrepresentation of such are types of theft that leaves one empty or a vacuous cultural form.[200]

Baruti's main concern is with music, particularly hip hop. He is scathing about the way black music has been appropriated 'as part of a long term tradition in white America' epitomised by, for instance, Benny Goodman being called 'the King of Swing' and Elvis Presley 'the King of Rock and Roll.'[201] These appellations, Baruti says, gave them elevated status above black artists of equal talent, and neglected or played down the fact that both the genres and the style of performance originated in black music and that many compositions were written or first recorded by black people.

A prime example of this in Baruti's view and in the view of another of the essayists, Diarra Osei Robertson is the appropriation and commodification of the culture and art movement hip hop:

> Moreover, in the case of hip hop, the appropriation process over the past two decades has led to a mass commodification of the music, which diminishes the presence of socio-political commentary among mainstream artists.[202]

This, Robertson goes on to say, is exemplified by the promotion and success of the white hip hop artist Eminem by mainstream (white dominated) music companies:

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[199] *Soul Thieves* xx.

[200] *Soul Thieves xx.*

[201] *Soul Thieves xii.*

[202] Diarra Osei Robertson, 'Cash Rules Everything Around Me' in *Soul Thieves*, 42.

> For whites who become hip hop artists the central question is always authenticity. How does a white artist gain the licence to engage in an art form created by blacks? In most cases their legitimacy is derived from association and biography. Eminem represents the most notable example of cultural appropriation of hip hop by whites, primarily because of his fame and financial standing within the industry. There are several current white MC's . . . but Eminem often provokes the most debate. With the exception of a few critics, most observers acknowledge that his lyrical skills are above average at the minimum. The question of whether he is the "best" rapper today cannot be answered because it is a normative inquiry base on one's subjective views of aesthetic preferences.[203]

What is the nub of this argument? Is there really a serious issue at stake because one talented white artist expresses himself in a genre developed by black artists and becomes commercially successful? Has Eminem's success prevented other black artists from achieving fame and fortune? There is no cultural repression of the genre. There were certainly other black dominated companies which promoted black artists and were extremely successful, Motown, which Brown makes mention of, being the most notable. Brown frames the question with precision in the course of another essay on the appropriation of black dance forms and styles by white dancers:

> But why is this important? Because in the realm of cultural capital, black people come out with the short end of the stick: they do not reap the benefits of their cultural creativity. Does this mean that in this case black dance is off limits to whites? No, not necessarily, but it does allow for the discussion surrounding the ownership, definition, stewardship, and financial gain with regard to the commodity of popular culture. When it moves out of the initiating community, the meaning and context change. The stew with the complementing ingredients and flavours is a metaphor for cultural pluralism, or the indefinite survival of ethnic sub-cultures where the whole is comprised of several components that do not lose their individuality.[204]

So, the answer is clearly yes, it is a serious issue. In American culture which encourages and lauds creativity, innovation and invention, and rewards it intellectually and financially, why should commercial and public approval and the rewards which follow be taken away from the black originators by white financial and managerial carpetbaggers?

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[203] Diarra Robertson, *Soul Thieves,* 42.

[204] Tamara Lizette Brown, *Soul Thieves* 253.

Racism and apartheid in South Africa also resulted in cultural suppression and appropriation. In *Xhosa Poets and Poetry,* Opland shows that there was an active Xhosa language press publishing newspapers, literature and poetry up to the middle of the twentieth century, even though this was usually under white financial and editorial control. After that, many of the smaller publishers were taken over by larger, more commercially minded organisations, and many of these were controlled by Afrikaners who at best had little or no interest in promoting black literature, and at worst an active ideological interest in suppressing it. The result was that black literature suffered greatly. Opland quotes the Zulu author R.R.R. Dhlomo as saying in relation to his attempt to publish an edition of the writings of a noted trade unionist and anti-apartheid activist A.W. G. Champion:

> It is almost impossible to have these books published unless they are "fit for schools". It just means we shall have no great literature until this "for schools only" policy is ended. . . .Our Children will end up reading rubbish.[205]

Even the great Lovedale Press, which published many Black authors, adopted paternalist stance and exercised stringent editorial control. As Opland points out:

> . . . the literate *imbongi* seeking a wider audience for his traditional poetry, was constrained to water down his sentiments, controlling his natural impulse to speak out as a social critic if he wanted to see his poetry published . . . [206]

This meant that not only were black people deprived of access to their own literature but for ideological reasons white people were kept in complete ignorance that such literature existed. It meant that, growing up as a relatively well educated South African with a keen interest in literature and history, there was almost nothing available for me to read that was written by black men or women. Almost everything about black culture, literature, myth and history was mediated through a white perspective. I read Rider Haggard, Conrad, Kipling and R.M. Ballantyne, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick and a good deal of Wilbur Smith. In the early seventies *Indaba my Children* and *Africa is my Witness,* the wonderful collections of Bantu myth by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, a Zulu sangoma and story teller, were extremely popular. But this was an exception and the books were viewed by black people as something of a sell out and an adaptation of their myths for European tastes. The most widely read histories of the Zulu people, such as E. A. Ritter's *Shaka Zulu* and *The Washing of the Spears* by Donald Morris, were by

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[205] *Xhosa Poets and Poetry,* 342.

[206] *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*, 342.

white authors. Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* was the first novel I came across which presented a realistic contemporary picture of black people and the way they lived. It was not until I went to university and was privileged to attend a private reading by Oswald Mtshali (in 1971) of the poems from his collection *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum,* that I met my first black poet. I remember how savaged I felt at the unexpected bitterness and hostility of his poems, and how exciting that was, like the first rumblings of a long anticipated storm.

Now, in 2019, the cultures of America and South Africa have changed a great deal. On 27th April 1994 South Africa held its first fully democratic election and the ANC swept into power. ANC policies of affirmative action have meant that black people have been able to make inroads into every area of South African life. Black novelists, playwrights and poets are published by many publishing houses. In America things have also changed. On November 4th 2008, Barack Obama was elected as the first African American President. African Americans have won Pulitzer prizes and the Booker prize. Black people's contribution to American culture is recognised and rewarded in every field. Hip hop is dominated by black artists who have their own massively successful record companies.

What happened in the past was reprehensible. However, while it cannot be denied that great progress has been made, and that there is much more awareness of the dangers of cultural appropriation, the practice nevertheless continues, particularly where commercial interests are at stake. A somewhat egregious example of this is the 2018 American biographical comedy-drama film *Green Book* directed by Peter Farrelly, which is based on a true story and which won the 2019 Oscar for best film.

The film, set in America in 1962, tells how the internationally acclaimed black classical and jazz pianist Dr Don Shirley, employs a bigoted Italian American night club bouncer Tony Vallelonga, as his driver for a musical tour of the Southern states. During the course of the tour there are a number of racist incidents: the two men are arrested by bigoted policemen; they are refused permission to eat in a restaurant where Don Shirley is playing because it did not serve black people; and Don Shirley is forced to stay in seedy hotels because the better hotels were for whites only. Nevertheless, a relationship develops between them. Vallelonga's eyes are opened to racism, he overcomes his bigotry and they become good friends. Vallelonga is made the central character and the story as told is of how a bigoted white man redeems himself.

But the real narrative, and the story as it should have been told, is Don Shirley's. The story of how a black man in those difficult times, overcame the odds to become a renowned concert pianist and composer and why he undertook this dangerous and difficult concert tour.

It seems that for commercial reasons, the writers and producers feared that making a black man the focus of the narrative would reduce the film's appeal to white audiences and affect the commercial success of the film. As Joseph Harker said in *The Guardian*:

> So it feels like a major step backwards that this year Hollywood gave its most prestigious Oscar – best picture – to a nostalgic tale of a racist white driver somehow "saved" by his black passenger. Though the driver Tony Vallelonga, (played by Viggo Mortensen) is a former bouncer, and the passenger (Don Shirley, played by Ali) a concert pianist, it's Mortensen who is centre-stage, and received a nomination for best actor. Though Ali did win an Oscar, it was in the supporting actor category. The movie is written by Vallelonga's real-life son and the award was accepted on stage by its white-dominated producers.[207]

How does this bear on what I am doing, and on the writing of 'Rivonia'? In the context of apartheid South Africa, which was a development of a racist social system imposed by a colonial power, I am undoubtedly of the dominant settler culture. I am purporting to write in the voices of the oppressed minority culture - black South African men and women who have suffered oppression, injury and insult the like of which I cannot possibly have experienced, but which I attempt to imagine. My use of black men and women as characters has dangers as well as advantages, and both must be explained and justified.

Firstly, that attempt to imagine the experience does not seem to be an improper appropriation. If by law, privilege and class, you are prevented from experiencing what life must be like for millions of oppressed people, then as a writer, you must use your imagination to leap that gulf and try to empathise with them. That is one of the reasons why *Cry the Beloved Country* was so important. Yes, it was written by an educated and privileged white man, but it showed other white people something of the reality of black people's lives at a time when such experience was not available to them.

Secondly there is a real danger that I retell black narratives through white eyes thereby falling into the *Green Book* trap of favouring the secondary redemptive narrative, at the expense of the major narrative of the black suffering during the apartheid regime. I have four powerful white voices in 'Rivonia' – five if you include my own in the 'Prologue'. To counter that I have

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[207] Joseph Harker, 'Green Books Oscar Shows That Hollywood Still Doesn't Get Race,' https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/25/green-book-oscar-hollywood-race-best-picture-academy-racism, accessed on 4/3/2019.

five equally powerful black voices, two of them women. The black voices are not conciliatory. They tell their own narratives, but they also attack the presumptions that liberal white society can understand, empathise with or in any way mediate the black experience.

Thirdly, writing in this way helps to break down the barriers between cultures. One of the goals of apartheid regime was to separate cultures in such a way that there could be no contact or intermingling, and no empathy. Any meeting or intercourse between races, anything which promoted pluralism, cross-cultural understanding or cross-cultural fertilisation, anything which broke down barriers was regarded as dangerous and subversive, as the 'thin end of the wedge' which might cause the pillars of segregation to topple. For an artist to produce work which was cross-cultural, which borrowed from black culture or empathised with black people, was deeply frowned on and often banned or suppressed. Many white artists went to prison for doing this. The playwright Athol Fugard underwent huge risks when he developed and wrote a series of plays about the lives of black, coloured and white people, which accurately portrayed the suffering and the devastation wrought by apartheid. *The Blood Knot, People are Living There, An Offense under the Immorality Act, Boesman and Lena, Sizwe Banzi is Dead* among others, were all seminal plays, that used both black and white actors on the same stage. They demonstrated the power of theatre to defy political authority. To argue that an artist should not make theatre, poetry or literature in this way because it constitutes cultural appropriation, is to argue with the theorists of apartheid in favour of strict separation of cultures, of artistic shackles, of cultural monopoly, and control of art by the state.

Poets and writers need to recognise the dangers of cultural appropriation but not let them be deterrents in producing artistically genuine and honest work. It is possible, with care and awareness to move away from the somewhat negative idea that cultural appropriation is always misappropriation and to look at the more positive aspects of appropriation as such as artistic cross-fertilisation. In his book *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Young identifies two sorts of artistic cultural appropriation:

> The first is appropriation of artistic content by individuals, namely artists who regard themselves as engaged in the production of works (or performances) valuable as object of aesthetic experience. Artistic works can include complete works (as when a musician performs a composition from another culture) or artistic elements. By *artistic elements* I mean styles, plots, musical themes, motifs, subject matters, genres and similar items. They are not themselves works of art. Instead they may be described as the building blocks of works of art. The second sort of activity concerns individuals who appropriate

> items which they regard as artworks, that is objects valuable as aesthetic objects. This is the appropriation of tangible works of art by individuals (such as Lord Elgin) or by museums.[208]

In the context of 'Rivonia' it is clearly the first sort of cultural appropriation I am concerned with. I am making something new from 'artistic elements', not appropriating something already made. I cannot deny that I take 'artistic elements' which are not from my culture and incorporate them into something new for my own purposes. I accept that this may be different from the purposes for which they are used in the parent culture, but I certainly do not claim the elements I make use of as my own nor, I believe, does my appropriation diminish these elements, deprive the parent culture of them, or prevent the parent culture (or anyone else) from using them as they were originally used.

Such borrowings of 'artistic elements' have been common practice for artists in many cultures from time immemorial. One only has to look at the wholesale borrowing by the Romans from Greek art and literature, at the way the English architects and painters of the early eighteenth century borrowed from the masters of the Italian Renaissance, at Picasso's borrowing motifs from African cultures for 'Les Damoiselles de Avignon' and 'Guernica', at Elvis Presley's and the Rolling Stones' borrowing from black musicians like Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry.

In South Africa, where many cultures intermingle, cultural appropriation in the field of music is so frequent that it could almost be regarded as a process of cross-fertilisation. Some notable examples are: Paul Simon's use of Zulu rhythms and percussion and collaboration with the Black South African musicians of Ladysmith Black Mambazo; the late Johnny Clegg OBE, the white Zulu, who fused Zulu music and dance into his own version of Afro pop; and the new South African national Anthem, the freedom song 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica' ('God Bless Africa'), composed by the Xhosa clergyman Enoch Sontoga in 1897, which has a melody based on the hymn 'Aberystwyth' by Joseph Parry.

In literature, the cross-fertilisation is equally prevalent. Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is written in English and takes its title from Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming'. The Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work *A Grain of Wheat* is also written in English, and takes its title from the Gospel according to St John, and it shows the influence of the novels of D.H.

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[208] James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, New Directions in Aesthetics 6 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), 4.

Lawrence and Joseph Conrad.[209] The English author Alexander McCall Smith has had considerable success with his series *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* which is set in Botswana and has, as its central character, the female Botswanan detective Mma Ramotse. The Caribbean poet Derek Walcott drew heavily on the European canon of epic poetry to write his own Caribbean epic using a rhyme scheme closely based on Dantean *terza rima* (see above).

My own somewhat surprising experience of literary and religious cultural appropriation occurred while researching 'Rivonia' and this accompanying thesis. I discovered that a graphic novel had been written about the life of the Xhosa prophet Makhanda who features in 'Rivonia' and I placed an order for it. After some weeks the book did not arrive, and I contacted the seller. I was assured that it was on its way. Finally, it arrived. I opened the package to find not the graphic novel I had ordered, but a small paperback called *Proclaim Freedom to my People,* written by a theologian, Simon Maimela, and published by an obscure South African publishing house as a part of their black theology series. A stamp inside the cover indicated that the book was formerly the property of the Irish School of Ecumenics. Opening the book, I found to my astonishment a series of essays on the invidious position of the Church in the Republic of South Africa. Mr Maimela, a minister of the Lutheran Church and Professor of Theology at the University of South Africa had this to say about it:

> It is an open secret that South African society is riddled with many contradictions, and foremost among them is the fact that we pride ourselves on being a Christian country; yet our society has fashioned, nurtured, tolerated and carried to its logical consequences one of the most brutal and oppressive social systems known to humanity: apartheid. This political system of racial domination created and upheld by White Christians, is one which is committed to the denial of human rights and liberty to the majority of South African citizens, especially those of African ancestry, regardless of what the Gospel of Jesus might proclaim and teach to the contrary.[210]

From the 1820s, when Christian missionaries first became active in South Africa, Christianity took a profound hold on the Black population. Is this not then an example of cultural appropriation - that black people should feel that the spiritual pillars of European culture are equally theirs, and that black theologians like Simon Maimela and indeed Bishop Desmond Tutu

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[209]Wikipedia, *A Grain of Wheat* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Grain_of_Wheat accessed on 17/7/2018.

[210] S. S. Maimela, *Proclaim Freedom to My People: Essays on Religion and Politics* (Braamfontein [Johannesburg]: Skotaville Publishers, 1987), i.

should bring the spiritual teachings of the Old and New Testaments to bear against the corruption that was apartheid?

Curious as to how I had received this book, which had a direct bearing on many of the themes I was thinking about for this commentary, instead of the graphic novel I had ordered, I contacted the seller. They denied all knowledge of the book, and claimed never to have had it on their stock list.

So far, I have provided numerous examples of cultural appropriation which can be justified, or where the end result is mutually beneficial to both cultures. However, there are many circumstances where appropriation of cultural or artistic elements is immoral and ill-conceived, and where it can harm the parent culture and perhaps threaten its viability. One of these is, as Young suggests, by misrepresentation - using appropriated material in such a way as to create harmful stereotypes. The *Black and White Minstrel Show*s and anti-semitic Nazi propaganda are some of the most egregious examples of this practice. Disney, too, has engaged in such misrepresentation - for instance in the representations of native Americans in the cartoon film 'Peter Pan' or more recently, in its attempts to register the common Swahili phrase 'hakuna matata' (used in the musical *The Lion King*) as a trademark and thereby control its use everywhere.

This brief analysis shows that although cultural appropriation of 'artistic elements,' to again borrow Young's useful phrase, can be harmful, it is in the main a practice which, when used honestly and sensitively, is beneficial to both cultures and promotes inter-cultural empathy and understanding. However, there is another aspect of cultural appropriation which presents different and more complex problems and arises as a direct result of my use of dramatic monologue for speakers who are of different gender, race and class to me. The whole notion of speaking for others (prosopopoeia) in this way is problematic. In 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', Linda Alcoff analysed this and questioned whether anyone had any authority to speak on behalf of another at all. Alcoff frames the problems in terms of the speaker's location:

> The recognition that there is a problem in speaking for others has arisen from two sources. First, there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. In other words, a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or dis-authorize one's speech. The creation of women's studies and African-American studies departments was founded on this very belief: that both the study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must come to

> be done principally by the oppressed themselves, and that we must finally acknowledge that systematic divergences in social location between speakers and those spoken for will have a significant effect on the content of what is said. …The second source involves a recognition that, not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing oppression of the group spoken for. … Thus, the work of privileged authors who speak on behalf of the oppressed is coming more and more under criticism from members of those oppressed groups themselves.[211]

The way Alcoff uses location to frame the problem is a great help in recognising and understanding it. However, it must surely be debateable that oppressed groups should have a monopoly on the study of their oppression. This would seem to be contrary to deeply held notions of academic and literary freedom as well as a hindrance to objectivity and remedy.

In an essay on the ecological advocacy of the poets Denise Levertov and Gary Snyder, Nielsen also analyses the problems of this practice, and whether it can be justified by claims like purity of motive or the need for political or literary advocacy. Nielsen notes that:

> Feminist and postcolonial theory draw attention to the practical and ethical obstacles inherent in political and literary advocacy. While purporting to be for the good of the other, an act of advocacy may be in complicity with the silencing of the other.

And she goes on to say:

> As Elizabeth Harvey demonstrates in her reading of Donne's fashioning of the voice of Sappho, the adoption of a female voice by a male can help perpetuate the basic oppression of women that has required their silence.[212]

Supporting this position, John Macleod observes that Spivak makes it entirely clear in her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern speak?' that neither feminists, nor intellectuals nor artists can be:

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[211] Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Cultural Critique* No. 20, (Winter, 1991-1992), 5–32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354221, accessed on 27/06/2018.

[212] Dorothy M. Nielsen, 'Prosopopoeia and the Ethics of Ecological Advocacy in the Poetry of Denise Levertov and Gary Snyder', *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 34, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 691–713. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208806 accessed on 21/5/2018.

> . . . cast as reliable mediators for the voices of the oppressed, or mouthpieces through which the oppressed can be retrieved and clearly speak.[213]

I acknowledge the pertinence of what Alcoff, Spivak and Nielsen say to my own work. In 'Rivonia' I not only cross gender lines, I cross race and class lines as well. I have not been able to find any other poets who have used dramatic monologue in this way. Nevertheless, I defend my right to work as I have done, and I must explain why I found it necessary to do this and how I have chosen to do this.

Firstly, sometimes it is necessary for the privileged to speak on behalf of the oppressed, when oppressed and disadvantaged voices or narratives are not being heard, amongst their own kind or amongst the privileged. This is particularly the case for Winnie Mandela who is the model for 'The Prisoners Wife' section. Dramatic monologue enables me to bring out her radical voice and let her speak fiercely and passionately about her role in keeping the ANC alive while its male leadership were imprisoned or in exile, her difficulties with the security forces and other dangerous elements and her fears that radicals like her would be suppressed in the power struggles to come.

Secondly, I do not always speak on behalf of the oppressed. I am often speaking, as an apologist for the oppressor, to empathise or in order to compensate for my lack of sympathy and empathy during the period I enjoyed the benefits of my privileged position without thought of the suffering it caused. Three of the black characters in 'Rivonia' in particular 'Drum' interrogate me about my complicity with apartheid and my smug and patronising attitude to black people – and rightly so.

Thirdly, the political and social climate has changed over the past twenty years. Oppressed and disadvantaged peoples now have their own powerful advocates on the contemporary political, social and academic stage. It cannot therefore be said that my use of these voices in any way suppresses them or prevents them being heard directly. Sadly however, the commercial climate has not really kept pace and sometimes you need to look and listen harder for these voices than you should.

The use of strong female voices by novelists and playwrights is commonplace. The practice is ancient, going back to the Greeks, *Antigone* and *Electra* being notable in this respect. In modern times Ibsen and Strindberg wrote powerful plays with women as central characters.

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[213] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed, (Manchester U.K. and New York: Manchester University Press :2010), 219.

In the 19th century, when the use of dramatic monologue was popular with poets, there was a tendency to divide along gender lines with poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Amy Levy, Christina Rosetti and Felicia Hemans all writing monologues with female speakers. Tennyson wrote several monologues for men but, despite wide ranging research, the only male poets I have come across who wrote monologues featuring female voices are Browning and Simon Armitage. Browning has female voices in his collection *Men and Women* and there is Pompilia's monologue, one of the central poems of *The Ring and the Book*. Simon Armitage has a long poem called *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*. I deal with both these poems in more detail in other parts of this thesis. Without female voices, 'Rivonia' would be diminished. They are integral to the nature of the poem, and necessary to counterbalance the strong male voices and bring a woman's perspective.

Because 'Rivonia' is an epic poem and also a praise poem for Mandela, it needs to take a critical look at him as a man and at some of the things he did. This is in keeping with the Xhosa tradition of praise poetry. As Opland says:

> In past days, the *imbongi* was a man intimately connected with his chief, and invariably formed part of his chief's official entourage. Wherever the Chief went, the *imbongi* preceded him shouting an *izibongo* in his praise….His function did not end there, however, for he had the privilege of criticizing the chief in his poetry with impunity….His criticism was never intended to stir up dissent or dissatisfaction but rather to express popular opinion and to moderate excessive behaviour….He can be seen therefore as an important mediator between chief and commoner.[214]

Mandela's behaviour towards women was not always good. He was quick to divorce his first wife after he met Winnie and he had a patriarchal nature which was at times authoritarian. The oppressive yoke of apartheid often fell more heavily on women and families than on men. This is particularly so in the case of the political leadership of the ANC. Although they were incarcerated often under harsh conditions, they nevertheless led relatively predictable and stable lives and always had recourse to the ministry in charge of prisons and to the courts. Their wives on the other hand were left in charge of the family which they had to maintain in precarious circumstances. Many were banned, which made it difficult if not impossible to communicate with friends and relatives. Both Winnie and Albertina Sisulu were arrested, held in solitary confinement and tortured. They had no recourse to law – the security services were not

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[214] *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*, 21.

answerable to the courts or even to Parliament. Furthermore, they were exposed to the wrath of white extremists who were ever-ready to intimidate with threats, bullets and bombs. Winnie was instrumental in keeping Mandela's name alive and in the public eye while he was imprisoned. Despite a number of articles and films, this sacrifice made by the wives and families of the political leadership is insufficiently acknowledged by the ANC, the black majority and the white minority. The ANC and the black majority are unwilling to accept any criticism of their revered leaders, however justified. The white minority has always had cause to fear Winnie as her politics were much more radical than those of Nelson Mandela. She always refused to renounce her radical politics and her demagoguery, which the white population saw as a threat. She was always a fierce advocate for more rights to be given to the black people and for a substantial re-distribution of wealth and land in the post-apartheid South Africa. Moreover, I also believe that many whites and blacks are unable to forgive Winnie for her undoubted hooliganism, her association with gangsters which resulted in the formation of the Mandela football team which intimidated Sowetans in the 1980s and her involvement in the murder of Stompie Moeketsi in 1989.

I think it is both possible and necessary to accept both sides of Winnie's nature - to criticise her inflammatory politics, her demagoguery and her autocratic tendencies, and at the same time to acknowledge the role played by her, by Albertina and by many other black women in keeping the ANC alive as a political force throughout the incarceration or exile of its male leadership. I felt it important in writing 'Rivonia' that this should be stated forcibly by black female characters based on Albertina Sisuslu and Winnie Mandela.

My position in South Africa was that of the privileged white liberal. Interrogatory voices are needed to challenge the invidious nature of that position. These voices need to be black. Steven Biko had this to say about white liberals in September 1970, around the time I was in my first year at the University of the Witwatersrand studying for a BSc in Psychology and Computer Science:

> Thus in adopting the line of a non-racial approach, the liberals are playing their old game. They are claiming a "monopoly on intelligence and moral judgement" and setting the pattern and the pace for the realisation of the black man's aspirations. They want to remain in good books with both the black and white worlds. They want to shy away from all forms of "extremisms", condemning "white supremacy" as being just as bad as "Black Power!". They vacillate between the two worlds, verbalising all the complaints of the blacks beautifully while skilfully extracting what suits them from the exclusive pool of

> white privileges. But ask them for a moment to give a concrete meaningful programme that they intend adopting, then you will see on whose side they really are. Their protests are directed at an appeal to white conscience, everything they do is directed at finally convincing the white electorate that the black man is also a man and that at some future date he should be given a place at the white man's table.[215]

Even the most ardent of white activists could not escape the fact that simply by living a normal life in South Africa they were participating in the system and enjoying the privileges that it conferred on the white minority. The novelist Gillian Slovo, the daughter of Joe Slovo and Ruth First,[216] is an almost exact contemporary of mine. In her autobiography *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country,* she writes of her relationship with her parents and what it was like to grow up with parents who sacrificed everything for their political beliefs. She says this of the family's relationship with their black servants:

> They made choices, brave choices that others in their country did not make. For this they were heroic. But they were also lucky. There were few commonplace restraints to hem them in. If they had opted for ordinary white lives in South Africa, they could certainly have made more money yet even though they chose a highly dangerous course, they were still white and well off. Ruth was a working mother and an activist, but she had no need to occupy the kitchen: she had domestic workers to do the cooking, the cleaning and the childcare.[217]

Activists and abhorrers of apartheid the Slovos may have been, but even while working to overthrow the system they were not prepared to forego white privilege. Later in her book Slovo recounts how she met with Mac Maharaj, friend and fellow inmate with Mandela on Robben Island. Maharaj told her that when he and several of his comrades saw her sister Shawn Slovo's film *A World Apart,* which deals with the Slovo family's last year in South Africa and gives a 'wrenching account of the impact on a child of her mother's political involvement'[218], they felt as a group that the girls in the film needed to be given 'a good slap'. Gillian Slovo explains:

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[215] *Biko* 23.

[216] Joe Slovo was a leading member of the African National Congress (ANC). Ruth First was also a Communist and member of the ANC, a scholar and leading figure in the Anti-apartheid movement until her assassination in 1982.

[217] Gillian Slovo, *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* (London: Little, Brown & Co, 1997), 40. (From now on *Every Secret Thing* with the page reference).

[218] *Every Secret Thing,* 96.

> *A good slap* - it felt like that to me. I read behind the words and breathed in their implications. They conjured up a judgment I knew only too well, that we were white kids who indulged ourselves in whining. Legions of other renowned whiners, white South Africans all, who'd been brought up with black servants to wipe their noses, make their beds, tell them when to walk, massed behind us.[219]

No-one to my knowledge has made a film about the impact on the Mandela children or the Sisulu children of their parent's political involvement, or indeed of the children of the countless other black men and women who stood up and fought against apartheid.

By using the form of dramatic monologue in 'Rivonia', I enable the female speakers to appear as survivors, victors and interrogators and not as passive or subjugated victims. Monologue acts as a catalyst. It enables the speakers to rehearse their suffering and mistreatment and to vent their anger on me as auditor and, through my white maleness, on the white and black patriarchy. There are people better placed than me to acknowledge this, and many who have done so, but many more have not. I accept the theoretical and practical problems that arise when a privileged white male purports to speak for a black woman. However, it is necessary for me personally and poetically to be the scapegoat of this anger. Personally, by way of expiation for my participation in apartheid and consequent complicity with the apartheid regime. Poetically because 'Rivonia' fulfils my intention that these voices should become 'epos' and be heard, and I believe I have done this in a way which ameliorates the problems raised by Alcoff, Nielsen and particularly by Spivak.

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[219] *Every Secret Thing,* 97.

Pastiche and authority

I am black, I am black!
And yet God made me, they say;
But if he did so, smiling back
He must have cast his work away
Under the feet of his white creatures,
With a look of scorn, - that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay.[220]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long verse monologue 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' highlights two major difficulties with writing epic using dramatic monologue: poetic authority and pastiche. A number of tricky questions immediately become apparent. How does an upper-middle class Victorian woman, who had possibly never met a person of colour, write in the persona of a maddened and desperate slave who has murdered her child? By what authority does she create an imaginary voice exclaiming, 'I am black, I am black!'? Can the reader accept that such a voice is a true and accurate rendering, or is it to be taken as modulated by the persona of the poet? Is the point of view that only direct experience can confer authority and truth, and that personal knowledge and participation is the only authentic basis for narrative poetry on contemporary events, the correct one? If that is so does the imaginative rendering of the poet, the playwright and the novelist count for very little? I am going to deal with some of these questions in this section.

Prince Henry's 'Crispin's day speech' in Shakespeare's *Henry V* encapsulates the dilemma of authority and pastiche which poets and dramatists face:

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.[221]

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[220]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point' (4), from *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sally Minogue (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2015), 219 (From now on *Barrett Browning* with the page reference).

[221] Henry V, IV. iii. 61–67.

The speaker's (and by inference the poet's) audience are the 'gentlemen in England now a-bed' who must, of necessity, 'hold their manhoods cheap' while the poet speaks like one who 'fought with us upon St Crispin's day'. Shakespeare probably knew from his research into contemporary accounts that Prince Henry had spoken to his men before the Battle of Agincourt but there is no record of what Henry said, nor could Shakespeare possibly have known how he said it.

The 'St Crispin's day speech' is a pastiche: Prince Henry's voice, is modulated by Shakespeare's voice, influenced by the great dramatic speeches of the Elizabethan stage which Shakespeare knew intimately, and grafted onto the skeletal framework of his research and understanding of how a good general motivated his men before a battle. The Prince's speech is a creation of Shakespeare's poetic imagination, but it is the quality of the poetry that confers on it the ring of truth and gives it poetic authority. Verse monologues are a well-used form in English poetry. According to Hurley and O'Neil:

> Verse monologues appear as far back as Anglo-Saxon poetry, as seen in for instance, *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*. But whereas such poems offer the poet's voice, dramatic monologues – which did not emerge as a distinct genre until the late nineteenth century – offer a poetic persona, a fictional voice.[222]

By the end of the nineteenth century two distinct genres of monologue had emerged: the lyric and the dramatic. The litmus test for distinguishing the two is the degree to which it is possible to differentiate between the speaker and the poet. In an early key paper on dramatic monologue, Sessions offers the following working definition of 'the perfect dramatic monologue':

> For more detailed clarification and differentiation, this extended definition of the type is suggested: A perfect dramatic monologue is that literary form which has the definite characteristics of speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present.[223]

Sessions suggests Browning's 'My Last Duchess' as a benchmark of the form. But as with any test, there is no hard and fast line, and different schools of criticism offer different interpretations. Byron, in her book *Dramatic Monologue*, proposes another way of distinguishing the lyric monologue from the dramatic. She says that the reader should focus closely on the 'signals found on the page' because, she argues:

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[222] *Poetic Form*, 167.

[223] Ina Beth Sessions, 'The Dramatic Monologue', *PMLA* vol. 62, no. 2 (June 1947), 503–16.

> In the lyric, there are no signals to the reader that the speaker should be distinguished from the poet; on the contrary, there are more likely to be signals that encourage conflation of poet and speaker. … With the dramatic monologue, however, there are, to varying degrees always signals that we should not conflate poet with speaker.[224]

The reason I am concentrating on the distinction between these two types of poetic monologue is that the lyric monologue, focussing as it does on the poet's own interior response to the subject matter, is not susceptible to the criticism that it lacks authority in the same way that dramatic monologue is.

Percy Shelley was a leading practitioner of the lyric monologue, and one of the leading proponents of the doctrine that the special sensitivity of the poet conferred authority to write of things outside of his or her experience. Whether the lyric poet claims such authority by virtue of his or her own interior truth, as Shelley maintains when he writes in *A Defence of Poetry* that the poet is, '…driven like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre . . .'[225] or whether in making such a claim, the poet dons a mantle of prophetic authority, is perhaps less a matter of critical argument than of deep personal religious or quasi-religious faith. In Shelley's philosophical verse dialogue, 'Julian and Maddalo', which presents an imagined dialogue between two poet/ philosophers - Julian (Shelley) and Maddalo (Byron) - the speakers seem to be manifestations of Shelley's own ego, particularly 'the maniac' whose words seem to foreshadow emotional states Shelley uses in *A Defence of Poetry* written two years later:

> But *me* – whose heart a stranger tear might wear
> As water drops the sandy fountain-stone,
> Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan
> For woes which others hear not, and could see
> The absent with the glance of phantasy,
> And with the poor and trampled sit and weep,
> Following the captive to his dungeons deep;
> *[Me]* - who am as a nerve o'er which do creep
> The else unfelt oppressions of this earth[226]

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[224] *Dramatic Monologue*, 12.

[225] Percy Bysshe Shelley,'A Defence of Poetry', *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H Reiman, Sharon B Powers, and Neil Fraistat, (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2002), 511 (from now on *Shelley* with the page number).

[226] *Shelley*, 131 'Julian and Maddalo', ll. 441 – 50.

Dramatic monologue works in a different way to lyric. The poet is not assuming a special authority unavailable to others but is setting up a discourse between the speaker and the reader through an unseen auditor, by which the reader makes his or her own judgment on the mental state and character of the speaker. But at the same time the poet can put across his or her own philosophical ideas or social or political critique. It can be unashamedly didactic, as Hurley and O'Neil say:

> . . . dramatic monologue offered a way of exploring the most outlandish and inflammatory ideas without requiring the poet to hold a fixed, resolvable or respectable position.[227]

But what about personal experience? The argument that personal participation and experience is a necessary validator of artistic statement and expression is a dubious one. Picasso painted 'Guernica', one of the greatest anti-war statements of all time, in exile in Paris at the behest of the Spanish Republican Movement. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' while sitting in a London living room. So vivid is the voice of the speaker in this poem, that usually only an astute reader who knows something of Barrett Browning is aware that this is a dramatic monologue. In her essay 'Teaching Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', Schaub says that her students consistently identified the poet with the speaker, believing that the poet herself had suffered rape and killed her baby, even when they were presented with evidence of the cultural and geographical differences between the poet and the speaker.[228]

Barrett Browning was an early feminist and supporter of the emancipation of slaves. She wrote 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' at the request of a friend of hers in the American abolitionist movement and it was published in the magazine *Liberty Bell* in 1848. Barrett Browning was noted for the depth of her reading and research even among poets. The speaker is an escaped slave who has evaded her pursuers and has made her way to Pilgrim's Point where the earliest American settlers landed in their search for Liberty. She has been appallingly treated, her lover murdered, and she raped. In her desperation, she has strangled her infant child because it resembled her white rapist.

Why in that single glance I had

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[227] *Poetic Form*, 169.

[228] Mellissa Schaub, 'The Margins of the Dramatic Monologue: Teaching Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"', *Victorian Poetry* 49, no. Winter 2011 (n.d.) 557–68.

Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all
I saw a look that made me mad!
The *master's* look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash . . . or worse! –
And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl.[229]

The story has striking similarities to that of Sethe, the protagonist in Toni Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*. Morrison based her novel on the life of Margaret Garner, who dramatically murdered her child to prevent its recapture after a failed escape attempt in 1856.[230] This suggests that such occurrences of extreme horror, brought about by the cruelty of the master/slave relationship and involving the shattering of the mother/child bond, were not uncommon.

Barrett Browning herself seems to have had no difficulty adopting the black persona and speaking in the voice of a black woman. She seems to have trusted in the justice of the abolitionist cause, her own skill and poetic imagination and her wide-ranging reading and research to give her poem the necessary authority and authenticity required. There are also other personal issues which give depth and colour to the voice. It is well known that she suffered at the hands of her authoritarian father before she eloped with Robert Browning. However, there is another darker and somewhat ironical family issue, that confers on Barrett Browning the authority to write in this voice. Her father and grandfather owned a plantation in Jamaica worked by slaves, and the family fortune was founded on the wealth it generated. Indeed, the comfortable Italian lifestyle she was able to adopt with her husband Robert would not have been possible without it. There is therefore a justifiable desire on the part of the poet to use her skill to provide some recompense, which she has done by creating a monologue which engages the public in a Bakhtinian discourse between the scion of a slave owning family and the escapee black slave.[231]

Any adoption of another voice must involve some degree of mimicry which will always be modulated by the writer's own voice. It must of necessity be considered a pastiche of the two

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[229] *Barrett Browning,* 223.

[230] Margaret Garner: - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Garner accessed on 12th August 2017.

[231] *Barrett Browning* note 93 on 678.

voices. But what is meant by pastiche, and is the critical label of pastiche which is often levelled at monologue, justified? *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines pastiche as:

> . . . a medley of various things or specifically a literary or other work of art composed in the style of a well-known author or artist.[232]

But pastiche can easily tip into parody in which, resorting to the OED again:

> . . . the characteristic themes and the style of a particular work or author are exaggerated or applied to an inappropriate subject for the purpose of ridicule.

Frederic Jameson makes a sharp distinction between pastiche and parody in his discussion of the problems of pastiche:

> In this situation parody finds itself without a vocation: it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of any laughter and of any conviction that alongside the normal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.[233]

Jameson regards pastiche as necessarily incorporating some degree of irony reflecting the postmodern condition. The difficulty for a poet, particularly if the speakers are historic characters or based on readily identifiable characters who spoke clearly and loudly with their own voices, is to produce something which is recognisably authentic without any trace of irony. Indeed, the writer of dramatic monologue or epic must scrupulously avoid parody and satire if the speaker is to be taken seriously. This was something to which T.S. Eliot gave careful consideration. Eliot had a high regard for Browning's work on dramatic monologues:

> There is much, and varied, fine blank verse in the nineteenth century but the nearest to colloquial speech is that of Browning – but significantly, in his monologues rather than his plays.[234]

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[232] Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[233] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, [1991], reprinted (London: Verso, 2008), 17

[234] T. S Eliot, *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose,* ed., John Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 62.

In Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' which he wrote in 1915, Eliot demonstrates the usefulness of the genre as a means for the poet to explore extreme psychological states. Like Shelley's mad man in 'Julian and Maddalo', Prufrock is distinguishable from Eliot but a reader perceives that there are certain aspects of Eliot's character that could render him Prufrock-like. One of these is the speaker's extreme state of ennui and indecision, in which the apparent energy of his opening invitation:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky

is constantly undermined by his obvious ineffectuality and prevarication:

> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate;
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revisions,
> Before the taking of toast and tea.[235]

Prufrock's apparently confident assertion that there is time 'to prepare' sounds like a Faustian pleading. His need to prepare an artificial persona with which to face the world seems to anticipate a somewhat unhealthily symbiotic relationship with the poet. The 'time for you and time for me' suggests an interchangeability of character, an invitation to the poet not just to take 'toast and tea' but to *become* Prufrock. This sort of close relationship between poet and speaker in dramatic monologue seems almost inevitable where the speaker is an entirely fictitious creature, a pastiche of the poet's imagination. Different difficulties and problems arise when the speaker of the dramatic monologue is or was a living persona. When this happens, it is highly likely that the poet's preliminary research will bring to light accurate biographical material, writings, opinions, discourses and perhaps even conversations to which attention must be paid. But, even if there is a careful record of these, the poet must hold in mind that he or she is not writing biography or trying to create journalistic reportage or documentary. Where there is no

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[235] T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, Faber Paperbacks (London: Faber, 1974).

record of what was said, the poet or dramatist is entitled to try and fill in the space with imagined discourse, but this must be true to the character of the speaker. Poets must rely on their imagination, research and craft to create a discourse for a given set of circumstances or in reaction to an historical event. But whatever methods the writer uses to discover his character's narrative, it is nevertheless a pastiche mediated by the writer's own personality, culture and predilection.

In March 2011, Radio 4 broadcast Simon Armitage's poem *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* with an introduction by Sophie Lancaster's mother. Sophie died in August 2007, after a brutal attack by local teenagers in Bacup, Lancashire left her in a fatal coma and her boyfriend severely injured. The murder seems to have been a hate crime, in that the couple were set upon for no reason other than their unconventional appearance.

The poem is written in the form of 10 poetic monologues in which Sophie, speaking from out of her coma reviews her life, telling her own history and her love for her mother and her family until she finally departs. It is a demonstration of how dramatic monologue in the hands of a skilled poet can deal sensitively and empathetically with the most delicate material while simultaneously providing scorching social commentary on the human condition.

x)

(Do I even know
that my man survived,
whose handsome head
I cradled and kissed
while they beat him with names,
while they stoned him with kicks,
whose innocent face
I tried to shield,
whose life I wrapped and held
with my own?

Will he think me cold
or impolite
if I don't respond
when he says goodbye,

…

As you did then, do again now:
mop my brow as you mopped my brow,
climb in my bed as you climbed in my bed,
lie at my side as you laid by my side,

…

Night follows day,
day becomes night.
I am sunken, deep,
elsewhere, vacant,
out of reach.

They have scanned and searched
For vital signs
but I'm
hardly a pulse,
barely a breath,

a trace,

a thread,

a waste,

a past.

The line on the screen goes long and flat.

Pull the curtains around.
Call the angels down.

Now let me go.

Now carry me home.

Now make this known.)[236]

This is the final monologue, which starts with an open parenthesis and ends with a closing parenthesis instead of inverted commas, to indicate that it is heard by an auditor but not as a sound, and that the speaker is deceased. The first verse presents the scene of the attack with almost biblical pathos as Sophie shields her lover, cradling his battered body like a *pietá*. Notice the short, stressed lines with sharp half-rhymes; 'wheel him in', 'stitches and pins'; which suggest a darting attention and fractured awareness. This sits oddly with the almost obsessive concern at her own inability to respond to the attention and love being shown to her by her lover and her mother; "Will he think me cold// or impolite".

As she begins to fade, she starts to feel increasingly close to her mother, expressing her need to be nursed and held as she was during her infancy in a haunting litany of separated lines. These climax in the grim finality of her departure which presents a tableau of extreme pathos which has within it echoes of Hamlet's death.[237]

Perhaps this idea of poetic authority can be considered as arising out of Shelley's extreme empathy ('a nerve o'er which do creep// the else unfelt oppressions of this earth') which gives the poetic persona authority to resonate in mimetic rhythm with the persona of the speaker at one end, and the factual reportage of the historian or biographer at the other. In constructing a lyrical elegy for Sophie Lancaster in this way using lyric monologue, Armitage places himself somewhere near to Shelley. Had he gone for the more distanced and dispassionate approach of Eliot in 'Prufrock' he would have been nearer the central line between lyric and dramatic monologue. Had he chosen to write as a third person narrator of the events leading up to Sophie's death he would have been past the centre and moving towards the territory of the biographer and the historiographer.

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[236] Simon Armitage, Monologue '(x' from *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (Hebden Bridge: Pomona, 2012).

[237] 'Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet Prince: And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!' Hamlet V:II: 344 – 5.

It is a common criticism of South African white poets, that because of their privileged experience they cannot possibly imagine what it was like to be a black person under apartheid, and they should therefore not presume to speak in a black voice. It is also common to criticise those who went into exile and did not stay home and participate in 'the struggle', as opportunists and bandwagoners furthering their poetic careers by identifying with those who did. Given the extremes of indignity and suffering the regime inflicted on black people, and the blood that was shed trying to overthrow it, this is fair criticism and it strikes home.

One response to this criticism is that common humanity demands that a poet look at these things and find some way of creating empathic dialogues with the people who suffered. I chose to do this by imagining the dramatic monologues of 'Rivonia'. Another response is that if by his or her craft, a poet can change the opinion of a reader or cause an auditor to better understand the experience of apartheid for a black man or women, or inspire someone to resist oppression with a heroic narrative of resistance to oppression, then something has been achieved. For me, those responses provide sufficient authority to write in this way.

As for pastiche, I freely admit to the charge. Because I allow my speakers to speak through me however distant they are from my own persona what they say must of necessity be modulated by my own voice thoughts and opinions, in the same way as the sound of the guitar's strings is modulated by the body of the instrument and whoever is playing it. So, in writing or trying to find a voice for Makhanda for instance, I tried to imagine a convincing voice which would be heard across the centuries. A key problem was that he had to speak in English so I used the technique of an epistolatory dialogue. The use of this device has enabled me to draw on poetic voices in epic poems written by Zulu and Xhosa poets which I was able to read in translation. I am particularly indebted to 'Emperor Shaka the Great' by Mazisi Kunene (written in Zulu and translated into English by the poet) and 'Mlanjeni's War' by D.L.P. Yali-Manisi (written in Xhosa translated into English by Jeff Opland and Pamela Maseko).

In writing dramatic monologue, I believe the poet's obligation to be true to the speaker is as great or perhaps even greater than that of a novelist to his or her characters. For this reason, I have tried to steer clear of any form of irony or satire except where the speakers would themselves have used it.

Heroes and the myths they are made of

Is it possible to write an epic poem without a central heroic figure? Hurley and O'Neil identify the presence of a hero as a key theme of epic poetry, and one which they believe is central to the continued survival of the epic poem as a genre because, 'its persistence as a form argues for an abiding cultural concern with heroism…' then, some paragraphs later they say, 'the presence of a hero undertaking a quest determined by higher powers is thus of larger cultural significance and suffused with archetypal overtones.'[238]

In *Gilgamesh,* one of the earliest epics we know, the hero journeys to the far land of Utnapishtim to find the secret of eternal life. Johns-Putra says that, *Gilgamesh* contains that element that we perhaps most closely connect to epic – heroism.[239]Homer begins *The Iliad* with, 'Sing, Goddess, of the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus// And its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians.[240] Odysseus wandered across the sea for ten years defying the wrath of the sea-god, Poseidon.

A central part of the heroic ethos of Greek myth is the quest for heroic immortality which is, as Monaghan says, 'What concerns a warrior most.'[241] Similarly, Johns-Putra observes that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* present complementary perspectives on heroism and the warrior code that is at the heart of epic:

> Thus where Achilles has to choose between a life of peace and glory in war, that is between *nostos* and *kleos,* Odysseus seems to achieve both. His is a double heroism of careful circumspection and martial courage. It demonstrates that a warrior's prowess can only be complemented by thoughtfulness.[242]

This theme of how the hero should conduct him or herself is not confined to Greek epic, nor as modernist epics demonstrate, to a single heroic figure within an epic. Aeneas rescued his father from the ruins of Troy, lost his wife and lover, descended into the underworld, and then set out on a voyage across the Mediterranean in order to found the city that became Rome. Beowulf journeyed to the land of the Danes to help Hrothgar, struggled with the monstrous Grendel and

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[238] Hurley and O'Neil, 120.

[239] Adeline Johns-Putra, *The History of the Epic*, Palgrave Histories of Literature (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7. From now on 'Johns-Putra' with the page number.

[240] *Iliad* - Lattimore trans, 75, 1:1 -2.

[241] Sheila Monaghan, 'The Poetics of Loss in Greek Epic', in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, 215.

[242] Johns-Putra, 34.

his mother, became ruler of the Geats, and met his end fighting a dragon. Dante centred *The Divine Comedy* on his own spiritual journey out of 'the dark wood' through the gates of hell to Paradise. In *Paradise Lost* Satan flew from Pandemonium across the sea of chaos to the Garden of Eden to bring ruin to God's new creation. In the twentieth century, Eliot's polyphonic *The Waste Land* has several characters including the blind prophet Tiresias, the drowned mariner Phlebus, and the diviner Madame Sosostris who could be regarded as heroic figures within the fractured narratives. Joyce's *Ulysses* (which I regard as an epic in novel form) follows Leopold Bloom on an Odyssean journey around Dublin. More recently, Walcott's *Omeros* draws its heroic men and women from the common people of St Lucia in their struggles against the sea, poverty and the ravages of slavery.

But if the heroic figure is an essential theme of epic, myth is an essential ingredient of the make-up of the hero. In T.S. Eliot's 1923 essay '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth' he explains how Joyce's method of using myth changed the way that writers use myth:

> It is here that Mr Joyce's parallel use of *The Odyssey* has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery…. In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him…. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.[243]

In this chapter I am going to take it as given that a heroic presence is central to epic. However, I am not proposing to analyse the nature of the warrior/hero or say anything about the 'journey of the hero' because that has already been done extensively by others. What I propose to do is to expand on what Eliot describes as 'Joyce's method,' that is to look at the way that epic-minded poets and storytellers, both past and contemporary, use myth to create, establish, embellish and enrich a heroic figure at the centre of their narratives, so that he or she can carry the epic structure they are creating. I will then return to my own poem and explain how I use Judeo/Christian myth for this purpose. Finally, I hope to show that the imaginative creation of a heroic figure, who has the spiritual strength and the political and moral authority to bring together different factions and to heal the wounds of past conflicts, is another way for the epic-minded poet to respond to Adorno's challenge.

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[243] *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 177.

If we step outside the Western cannon, it is possible to go much further back into the history of human culture than *Gilgamesh* and still find evidence of the centrality of the warrior/hero theme. The San (also known as Bushmen) were a rich and varied culture of hunter/gatherers who occupied parts of Southern Africa, possibly from as long ago as two hundred thousand years. Now they are restricted to a few small groups eking out a subsistence in parts of the Kalahari and Namibian deserts. Far from being primitive and simple, San cultures had rich and complex mythologies which expressed themselves in storytelling, dance and song, and most particularly in illuminations in the form of rock paintings and petroglyphs found all over Southern Africa. The San were undoubtedly better adapted to sustainable living within their own natural environment than we are to ours and their ways of living changed little over millennia. Many San rock paintings contain scenes which seem to represent complex narratives, but how can we discover what they mean now that the painters and their cultures have long vanished? As Lewis-Williams points out:

> Finding out about pre-historic minds is indeed a formidable challenge. Still we do sometimes - very rarely – discover a chink in the wall of time. Through that chink we hear the voices of people who lived at least part of their lives in pre-agricultural, pre-literate times… speaking in their own language.[244]

He goes on to explain that those working in the field of interpreting San culture have recourse to three important ciphers which in combination are a sort of 'Rosetta Stone' assisting them in this task:

> Highly detailed, though enigmatic, pictures (rock paintings and engravings) of the people's beliefs and religious experiences; 19th century phonetic texts… (compiled by Bleek and Lloyd) of a now extinct pre-historic language in which ancient people speak in their own words and idioms, of their beliefs, rituals, life histories and their hunting and gathering economy; and transliterations of those texts into English.[245]

Using these, he shows that the San had highly developed narratives which recorded shamanic contacts with supernatural beings in trance-like states mainly during rituals like the 'healing' or 'trance' dance. In the heightened states achieved during these dances the San believe that:

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[244] J. David Lewis-Williams and Sam Challis, *Deciphering Ancient Minds: The Mystery of San Bushman Rock Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 8, (from now on *Deciphering Ancient Minds* with the page number).

[245] *Deciphering Ancient Minds*, 9.

> their spirits leave their bodies to visit God, to fight off malign spirits of the dead, to heal the sick, to guide animals into the hunter's ambush and so forth.[246]

San paintings are of remarkable delicacy, accuracy and variety, but this is not art for art's sake. They are not simply mnemonics showing how a ritual was performed but have their own magical potency which could be activated to assist the San shaman entering the spirit world. San rock art frequently depicts the great dance, either in its entirety, or by means of single dancers in recognisable dancing postures. It also depicts animals with which the dancers engage and from which they derive potency. A reader of Lewis-Williams' commentaries on the rich detail, vitality and complexity of San rock paintings soon comes to realise how much Western notions of what constitutes literacy limit our appreciation and understanding of ancient cultures, and how much of this knowledge has been lost over the millennia. Here is a description of an enigmatic panel in the Eastern Cape:

> This panel shows a running lion with whiskers and teeth; it is pursuing ten human figures. Any impression that this is a real lion chasing real hunters in a real incident is soon dispelled. The whole scene is filled with indications as to the supernatural context of the event. Even at first glance, the unnaturally long feline tail suggests that we are not looking at a realistic depiction of a lion. But there is much more in the panel. Two of the fleeing figures bleed from the nose and are therefore clearly in a trance. They look back over their shoulders at the lion. The long lines that emanate from the tops of their heads almost certainly represent their spirits leaving their bodies via what the San believe is a hole in the top of the head. . . .[247]

There is a narrative here which, like any serious work of art, is understandable on many levels. Regrettably we can only engage with it on the most superficial level because, as Lewis-Williams points out, San artists were also shamans and the paintings are full of symbolic meaning:

> The painters, who were in many cases *!gi:ten* [people who had experienced a transcendental state], combined their experienced area of invisibility with their belief that the spirit realm lay behind the rock face. Painters used their art, inequalities in the rock surface and the area of invisibility in a scotoma [a depiction of a 'portal'] to represent

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[246] J. David Lewis-Williams, *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origin and Evolution of Religion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 247. From now on *Conceiving God* with the page number.

[247] *Deciphering Ancient Minds*, 142.

'portals' to this realm. The rock was the penetrable 'veil' between daily life and the seething supernatural world.[248]

The San also had a tradition of storytelling and some of these stories have been preserved by the diligence of early ethnographers. Chief among these were Wilhelm Bleek (1827 – 75) and his co-worker Lucy Lloyd. Between them Bleek and Lloyd managed to transcribe hundreds of stories which now form an invaluable archive and serve as a link to the narratives of the deep past when humans lived as tribes of hunter-gatherers.

Lewis-Williams gives a detailed analysis of one such story called 'The Lynx and the Anteater' in a 2018 paper.[249] It was told to Lucy Lloyd in March 1875 by Diä!kwain, a |Xam informant who had it from his paternal grandmother, Ttwobboken-!kauken. The story, which appears to be of great antiquity, concerns an anteater who had a relationship with a lynx which she kept in her house and which was her 'heart's-child'. The anteater loved to hear the lynx playing an instrument called the *!kummi* which the lynx played very sweetly. Other people also loved to hear the lynx play and this made the anteater anxious. The anteater hears the *!kummi* being played in a dream. She asks the lynx about this and the lynx replies that it was a stick which fell and struck the instrument. People come in the night to take the lynx away and the lynx goes with them. The anteater awakes and is distressed to find the lynx gone. But the anteater is *hurru ttwiten* a magical creature able to travel beneath the earth or take the shape of a bird. The anteater enters into the earth. She follows the abductors and causes the earth to fall in on them. Then she takes the lynx back to her house. She asks why the people came to abduct the lynx when they knew she was *hurru ttwiten* and had the power to destroy them.

The supernatural powers attributed to the anteater heroine are the essential and distinguishing features of her character. They are known to the abductors and to the audience. They enrich the narrative and elevate it from the mundane to the mythical. But the story-teller does not elaborate on what *hurru ttwiten* is in his story. The nature of this creature and the extraordinary powers she possessed, was something he took for granted as being part of the common store of folk knowledge and myth, too well known to his auditors to require elaboration. The narrator merely had to make reference to it in order to lift his tale out of the common store. As Lewis-Williams says elsewhere:

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[248] *Conceiving God,* 248 [my square brackets].

[249] J. David Lewis-Williams, 'Three Nineteenth-Century South African San Myths: A Study in Meaning', *Africa* 88, no. 1 (2018), 138–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197201000602.

> These parallels are fundamental to understanding the tales here discussed. They lead us into a transcendental realm in which much that is puzzling for Westerners was 'normal' for the San. To early collectors who tended to think linearly, this shifting, subtly interconnected realm, this web of meanings, was confusing and was easily rejected in favour of a straightforward 'moral' that takes no cognizance of the power of evocative nuggets and the shifting ambiguities of San thought and life.[250]

Epic poetry is not grounded in the mundane or the here and now. If the epic-minded poet wishes his narrative to resonate in a transcendental realm then the hero figure must be elevated from the ranks of ordinary men and women by allusion to supernatural attributes. This can be done by salting the narrative with what Lewis Williams refers to as evocative nuggets:

> My definition of nuggets is deliberately wide. They are resonant words, specific animals with rich connotations, items of material culture with significant associations, natural features and phenomena, idiomatic turns of phrase, and so forth. For the original San narrators and hearers, these nuggets had ramifying connotations, even though they may have been - indeed often were - parts of apparently throw-away remarks.[251]

Western Literature has its own evocative nuggets, a cornucopia of classical and religious myths and many and various ways of introducing them into narratives, allusion and metaphor being but two.

The destruction of Troy occurred around 1200 B.C.E. Most authorities consider that *The Iliad* was composed around 800 B.C.E., and if there was a warrior on whom the character of Achilles was based, he would have lived 400 years before Homer. According to the mythologist Eliade:

> Myth is the last - not the first - stage in the development of a hero… the recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures…The historical personage is assimilated with his mythical model (hero etc) while the event is identified with the category of mythical actions (fight with a monster, enemy brothers etc). If certain epic poems preserve what is

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[250] J. D. Lewis-Williams, 'The Jackal and the Lion: Aspects of Khoisan Folklore', *Folklore* 127, no. 1 (2106): 51–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2015.1096503.

[251] 'The Jackal and the Lion' above.

> called 'historical truth' this truth almost never has to do with definite persons and events but with institutions, customs or landscapes.[252]

The Achilles Homer gives us, demigod and magnificent warrior though he is, is a sulker, hugely self-centred and full of grievance and resentment. He is redeemed by his devotion to his friend Patroclus and his magnanimous treatment of the grieving Priam. Homer builds on the myths which were gathering around the persona of Achilles, by frequently using epithets to reference his divine ancestry or superhuman attributes. He is 'quick-footed Achilles' or 'lion hearted Achilles' or Achilles 'dear to Zeus'. The classical hero has a divine protector. As Achilles reaches for his sword in his quarrel with Agamemnon, the goddess Athene stays his hand. When Agamemnon sends his men to take Briseis away from him he complains to his mother, the sea goddess Thetis, and asks her to call in favours with Zeus. It is through his numerous associations with the immortal Gods that Achilles is elevated to something more than human.

Odysseus is a mortal, a good leader and fighter and a cunning strategist. When we see him in *The Iliad*, his actions are brave and bold, able but not remarkable. However, in *The Odyssey* Homer uplifts him. He is a lover of the nymph Calypso, held captive on her isle. Zeus sends his messenger Hermes to tell Calypso she must release him. He lands on the witch Circe's isle, but with help from Hermes he outwits her and frees his men from her spell. When, after many struggles with monsters both human and supernatural, he finally reaches Ithaca, the goddess Athene gives him great assistance. She first turns him into a ragged beggar, so he will not be recognised, then later after the defeat of the suitors for Penelope's hand, she enhances his beauty, so he appears attractive in Penelope's eyes.

It is by associating Odysseus with the gods, either as an object of their wrath (in the case of Poseidon), or as a favourite deserving of their assistance (as with Zeus and Athene), and thereby weaving myth into the history of his narrative which enables Homer to elevate Odysseus to heroic status. This does not happen with other contemporaries in the *Iliad* like Nestor, or Ajax or even Hector, who remain mere, if exceptional, men.

Milton, a devout republican, and probably a supporter of the King's execution, broke entirely from the classical tradition of epic. Although he is reputed to have started composing *Paradise Lost* around 1657, it was not completed until 1663. His political position after Cromwell's death in 1658 was precarious. Indeed, he was arrested after the Restoration in 1660

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[252] Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, [1949], (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 43.

and only released on the intervention of Marvell and other influential friends. Why choose to write an epic of all time and not of his own tumultuous time? Why choose cosmogonic myth? Bloom, in his seminal work on the influence of poetic forebears, says:

> Milton, with all his strength, yet had to struggle, subtly and crucially, with a major precursor in Spenser, and this struggle both formed and malformed Milton.[253]

But this is surely not quite right. Spenser drew extensively on Celtic and Arthurian myth in constructing his heroes. Milton drew on an entirely different tradition; biblical and apocryphal myth. The man who can aspire to something as hubristic as:

> I may assert Eternal Providence
> And Justify the ways of God to men.[254]

surely has in his sights the truths expounded by the great poets and prophets of the Old Testament like the Prophet Isaiah, and not the myths of Faerie:

> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
> Neither are my ways your ways declares the Lord
> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
> So are my ways higher than your ways
> And my thoughts higher than your thoughts.[255]

But then isn't this self-confidence the hallmark of the epic-minded poet, which is simply exhibited by Milton to a supreme degree? Perhaps self-confidence is unfair, and Milton genuinely believed he had received the prophetic summons as did the Old Testament Prophets. He was, as one of the most learned men in Europe and the possessor of a huge poetic talent, uniquely placed to respond to that summons. He drew on his knowledge of biblical, talmudic and apocryphal myth in the construction of Satan, arguably the real hero of *Paradise Lost.* As William Blake, no stranger to the prophetic mantle himself, famously said of Milton:

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[253] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety Of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11. From now on *The Anxiety of Influence* with the page number.

[254] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 4, (1:25 – 6).

[255] Isaiah 55:8 – 9, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (London: Collins, 2002).

> The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.[256]

And Shelley makes a similar and perhaps more cogent observation enjoining the reader to look more carefully at the nature of the myth as Milton presents it rather than the generally accepted interpretations:

> And Milton's Poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been the chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost.* It is a mistake to suppose that he can ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. . . . and this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius. He mingled as it were the elements of human nature as colours on a single pallet, and arranged them into the compositions of his great picture according to the laws of epic truth.[257]

Eliot wrote that "since Milton, we have had no great epic poem, though there have been great long poems."[258] and goes on to argue that this is because:

> . . . every supreme poet…tends to exhaust the ground he cultivates, so that it must, after yielding a diminishing crop finally be left fallow for some generations.[259]

He was speaking of the use of classical poetic language, but it could also be argued that in creating Satan and Adam, MiIton exhausted the classical idea of the hero, and thereby deterred his successors from developing heroic narrative in the conventional way. This was not from want of his successors' ambition or poetic ability. A changing and more sceptical attitude to the heroic and to myth of all sorts sullied the perception of epic in the intellectual aspirations of the poet. Rawson remarks that:

> . . . changing attitudes to war played a part in the gradual extinction of the idea that heroic poems were the greatest works that the soul of man was able to perform. . . . An increasing bourgeoise readership, the dilution of aristocratic aspirations and classical values were

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[256] William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', William Blake, *Blake: Complete Writings ; With Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 13. impr (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 148.

[257] *Shelley,* 526.

[258] *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 125.

[259] *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 125.

> further predisposing features of a culture increasingly inhospitable to epic. The emergence of mock-heroic in the narrow sense is one of the poetic consequences…. The mock-heroic moment is the product of a state of mind that could no longer write epic straight but would not leave it alone.[260]

Milton's immediate successors were unable to deal with the heroic except through irony and satire and this is inimical to myth and to the epic tradition of high seriousness.

If Milton's achievements made it impossible for epic-minded poets to write about the heroic in the conventional way, the interest in the development of the individual and the celebration of selfhood which came to the foreground during the nineteenth century, gave rise to a different type of epic hero: the poet him or herself. Johns-Putra quotes Weitrich as saying of the literary hero of the Romantic Period:

> Johnson had told the truth but not the whole truth: more important, he had attacked assumptions that the Romantics held as incontrovertible truths, namely, that the heroic poet leads a heroic life, and that there is a direct relationship between the character of the poet and the magnitude of his achievement.[261]

Looking back, the Romantics, particularly Blake and Wordsworth, saw in Milton the exemplary characteristics that the hero poet must have. In his sonnet 'London 1802', Wordsworth writes back to Milton identifying those characteristics:

> **London, 1802**
>
> Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
> England hath need of thee: she is a fen
> Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
> Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
> Have forfeited their ancient English dower
> Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
> Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
> And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
> Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
> Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:

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[260] Claude Rawson, 'Mock –heroic and English Poetry' in '*The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, 170.

[261] Johns-Putra, 114.

Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.[262]

Wordsworth welcomed the overthrow of reactionary government in Europe, although he appears to mourn the lack of a man of heroic stature, a venerable philosopher/poet who could give moral and spiritual guidance to the nation: a Homer, a Virgil, a Dante or a Milton. Perhaps he is setting himself up to be that poet. His reference to 'the heroic wealth of hall and bower' suggests that a virtual reservoir of such heroes exists in the rural countryside, from which he himself hailed.

To achieve this valorisation of himself, Wordsworth needed to mythologise his own life. This he does in his own epic, *The Prelude,* in which, as Johns-Putra says, 'the heroic action is the poet's mental and psychological maturation. . . .'[263] But the poet's tutor and guide on the path to his self-mythologisation is not a long-dead fellow poet or a helpful goddess, it is Nature herself. Every stage of development in the poet's psyche corresponds with a sublime encounter with Nature. So, when as a youth he commandeers a shepherd's boat under nature's tutelage:

The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!
Thank likewise for the means! But I believe
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame
A favour'd Being, from his earliest dawn
Of infancy doth open out the clouds,
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
With gentlest visitation;[264]

And he encounters a manifestation of sublime terror in the form of a monstrous cliff:

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat
went heaving through the water like a Swan

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[262] William Wordsworth, 'London 1802', https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45528/london-1802 accessed on 3-4-2018.

[263] Johns-Putra, 122.

[264] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind (Text of 1805)*, ed. Ernest De Sélincourt, 2nd ed, Oxford Paperbacks, 207 (London, New York: Oxford U.P, 1970), Book I, LL 349 – 356. From now on *The Prelude* with the page and line number.

When from behind that craggy Steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Uprear'd its head. I struck and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me.[265]

Here Wordsworth begins his report of the incident by mythologizing himself and his actions to give them heroic status. He achieves an exalted state of mind when he 'is worthy of myself!', he is Nature's 'favoured being', Nature is 'seeking him// with gentlest visitation' in the same way that Athene sought out her favourite, Odysseus. Wordsworth uses Homeric style similes to describe his actions and the natural surroundings: his boat, 'went heaving through the water like a Swan', the cliff, 'Uprear'd its head' like the monster Scylla. By using Nature in this way, Wordsworth succeeds in mythologizing his past to create a heroic and iconic poetic persona separate from William Wordsworth the ordinary man.

This technique was not available to Eliot when, with an ethnographer's eye, he looked back at the shattered remnants of European culture after the end of World War I. The civilisation he valued most highly was in ruins, the prime of its youth destroyed. He turned to poetry to record and salvage what he saw, 'These Fragments I have shored against my ruins'[266] is the last comprehensible line in *The Waste Land,* and perhaps the most important of the many ciphers to Eliot's poetic method. Like Crusoe, Eliot swam out to the wreckage of Europe and made off with what he could salvage, to try and re-build or create something new. He looked back into the past to his predecessors, to Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning and Tennyson, but he could not be like them. The hero of his poem could not be whole. The poet in him could not, like Wordsworth:

…with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
…see into the life of things'[267]

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[265] *The Prelude,* LL 375 – 385.

[266] 'The Waste Land', 430.

[267] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting The Banks Of The Wye During A Tour. July 13, 1798', ll., 47 – 49.

because such a mindset was no longer possible; the Romantic ways had been destroyed. He had to go elsewhere for his epic method. Nicholls explains why the old romantic ways could not stand:

> Fiction, it appears is disabled by its continuing association with forms of realism… In contrast to the "mythical method" fiction cannot make this world possible for art because it remains trapped within it, its moral edge blunted by those words "cheerfulness, optimism and hopefulness". . . . Eliot is contemptuous of romantic models of authenticity and expressivity and his appeals to myth and tradition are governed by a desire for an antithetical form of mimesis.[268]

Just as Odysseus cannot find his way back home to Ithaca, and on Circe's urging, voyages into the underworld to consult Tiresias, so Eliot returns to the great epics and myths of the classical past, and also goes to Tiresias, to ask the blind, old hermaphrodite prophet to tell him how to fashion a hero for his poem. This is of course all surmise, but, Agatha-Christie-like, Eliot offers a host of misleading clues in his 'Notes on the Waste Land':

> 218. Tiresias although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. …What Tiresias *sees* [thus], in fact, is the substance of the poem. [269]

Tiresias makes his first appearance in the poem in line 218:

> I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
> Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from the sea[270]

The whole passage is packed with allusion, including in the last line a reference both to Robert Louis Stevenson's famous poem *Requiem,* used both then and now at funerals and memorials:

> This be the verse you grave for me;
> "Here he lies where he longed to be,
> Home is the sailor, home from sea,

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[268] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 278.

[269] T. S. Eliot 'Notes on *The Waste Land*' in *The Waste Land: And Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 46. From now on *The Waste Land* with the page or line number.

[270] *The Waste Land,* (218-221).

And the hunter home from the hill."[271]

(218 – 221)

How often would Eliot have heard that verse as he attended funerals for friends and associates who fell. Tiresias is an inspired choice as the hero of an epic poem. He is a creature full of mythic potency, as are Medea and Circe, and the anteater of the San myth. Surely it is no co-incidence that Pound also recognises Tiresias' mythic potency, and opens his *Cantos* with Odysseus' consultation. Like Homer, Tiresias is blind. He is neither man nor woman but exists 'throbbing between two lives', and he can see into the future to the 'violet hour' when Odysseus and all other wanderers return home.

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –
I too awaited the expected guest[272]

And who is that guest but death? It is this recognition and willingness to use mythic potency which I think connects the epic-minded poet with humanity's most ancient rituals and religious practices. The San certainly believed such an idea. Lewis-Williams says, 'like holy relics and Orthodox icons, San paintings of Eland were reservoirs of potency.'[273] They facilitated the dancers' transition to the spirit world. These figures of classical myth have also acquired potency over centuries of use. When the poet evokes these figures and associates them with the hero of a narrative directly or by allusion, then the narrative itself is energised and taken towards the world of the spirit. It becomes transcendental, epic, a thing for all ages.

In 1977, the punk-rock group 'The Stranglers' had a hit single 'No More Heroes' which ends:

Whatever happened to the heroes?
Whatever happened to the heroes?
No more heroes any more
….
No more heroes any more[274]

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[271] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Requiem,* http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/requiem-3/ accessed on 8-4-2015.

[272] *The Waste Land*, ll 228 – 230.

[273] *Conceiving God,* 249.

[274] The Stranglers, *No More Heroes* (1977).

But who were they mourning as their lost heroes? Trotsky, a failed revolutionary; Elmyr de Hory, a con-man and master art faker; and Lenny Bruce, a foul-mouthed comedian and satirist who committed suicide. They were all flawed men and failures. Not at all the sort of people who fitted the traditional models of the hero. In the twentieth century the commonly accepted idea of the hero and heroic changed. It must now include the anti-hero, because most people believe that humans are too flawed to be afforded the accolade of hero, if not in serious literature then certainly in poetry. In our media-obsessed, need-to-know-it-all society we get our role models warts and all, and consequently our concepts of heroes are tarnished. Perhaps we are uncomfortable with the idea of a hero because it has long been tainted by its association with war and social upheaval. One of the clearest poetic statements of this changed attitude to heroes, and their place in contemporary society came from Auden in his poem 'The Shield of Achilles:

> She looked over his shoulder
> For ritual pieties,
> White flower-garlanded heifers,
> Libation and sacrifice,
> But there on the shining metal
> …
> Quite another scene
>
> Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
> Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
> As three pale figures were led forth and bound
> To three posts driven upright in the ground.
>
> The thin-lipped armorer,
> Haphestos, hobbled away,
> Thetis of the shining breasts
> Cried out in dismay
> At what the god had wrought to please her son, the strong
> Iron-hearted, man-slaying Achilles
>
> Who would not live long.[275]

[275] W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), 597-8.

Auden plucks his narrative from *The Iliad* but turns it on its head. The scenes of pleasant worship Thetis expects are replaced by a barbaric re-enactment of the crucifixions. This, implies Auden, is the heroic legacy. This is now what heroism is associated with. Achilles is no longer 'noble Achilles' or 'fleet-footed goodly Achilles' or even 'wise-hearted Achilles'; he becomes 'Iron-hearted manslaying Achilles.'

When I started to think about how to write an epic poem with Nelson Mandela at its centre, several problems confronted me. On the one hand he was a truly great man, someone who the world acknowledged was in the heroic mould. He fitted within the Victorian philosopher and social critic Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Man Theory', according to which chaotic and conflicting currents in society from which great events arise, are really a history of society's engagement with great men or heroes:

> For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at the bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men tried to do or attain; all things we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may be justly considered, were the history of these.[276]

In Mandela's lifetime many myths had grown up about his fortitude and resilience, and even his enemies and political opponents held him in awe. But his failings, particularly in his early family life, and also those associated with the activities of Winnie Mandela, were widely known. Nor, apart from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were his political achievements once in government particularly remarkable. Some parts of his obituary in *The Guardian* were decidedly nuanced:

> Mandela was a flawed man, as all men are flawed, and in the face of this one struggles to discover the roots of his greatness. He was certainly courageous, though he arguably failed his family. . .

And

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[276] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, And the Heroic in History* (Lecture 1, May 5th, 1840), (London: Cassell & Co., 1908), 11.

> The incompetence of the ANC government in South Africa under his leadership – while understandable in the light of ministerial inexperience and the sabotage of their efforts by the old guard civil service – offered little testament to his administrative abilities.[277]

This was not perhaps a great problem. Epic-minded poets like Pope, Shelley and particularly Byron did not hesitate to lash out at fellow poets and contemporary politicians:

> Bob Southey! You're a poet, poet laureate,
> And representative of all the race
> Although 'tis true you turned out a Tory at
> Last, yours has lately been the common case
> And now my epic renegade, what are ye at
> With all the lakers in and out of place?
> A nest of tuneful persons, to my eye
> Like 'four and twenty blackbirds in a pye,. . . [278]

There were many politicians and writers in South Africa who would merit the treatment Byron dished out, but polemic, caricature and satire are not my métier. That would take me into the province of mock-epic. I did not feel that the narratives I was discovering would benefit from such treatment, nor was this the way I wanted to write. I also felt that it was for journalists, historians and biographers to present the 'balanced' and 'objective' view of Mandela's achievements. I was after something different, something more timeless and less tangible.

Walcott accepted the need for the contemporary epic hero to be drawn from among the ordinary people rather than from some ruling or warrior class. The way the names of his heroic characters, the fishermen Hector and Achille, their lover Helen and the wounded Philoctete, allude to their namesakes in *The Iliad* works extremely well. Furthermore, as befits a great post-colonial epic he also pays attention to the burgeoning tradition of Afro-Caribbean myth. Philoctete's wound, inflicted by the rusted anchor of an old colonial slaving ship alludes back to his wounded classical namesake in and equally to the on-going spiritual and physical wounds of the slave trade. The wound is healed by Ma Kilman, the 'obeah-woman' and owner of the 'No Pain Café', who 'bathes him in the brew of a root'[279] she remembers from a deep African past.

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[277] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/05/nelson-mandela-obituary accessed on 6-4-2018.

[278] George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, Penguin Classics (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 41. 'Dedication' 1st Stanza.

[279] *Omeros,* 246.

Nevertheless, I feel that Walcott makes too much use of classical mythology and sometimes appears to 'doff his cap' to Homer:

> O open this day with the conch's moan, Omeros
> As you did in my boyhood, when I was a noun
> Gently exhaled from the palate of the sunrise[280]

In writing a post-colonial South African epic poem there were two major mythic traditions I had to pay attention to. One of these was Judeo-Christian myth as presented primarily in the Old Testament, the other was Bantu myth as expressed in the traditional praise songs and contemporary epics of the Nguni people, principally the Xhosa and the Zulu. Both these traditions were present and interlinked in the extraordinary milieu of South African religion and politics that I have already described. Opland says this of the nature of Xhosa praise poetry:

> Throughout Africa south of the Sahara, the most common form of poetry is known to scholars variously as praise poetry, or eulogy.…In South Africa, The Xhosa and Zulu word for poetry is *izibongo.* A Xhosa *izibongo* is an assembly of compact, allusive expressions, often composed by different people. …The core of such a collection of "praises" is a noun, often a metaphor, which may serve socially as an alternative name. [281]

Frequently the alternative names involve animal imagery or imagery drawn from nature. A good example of this is in this short verse that D.L.P. Yali-Manisi composed about Kaiser Mathanzima, the leader of the Transkei Bantustan and a political puppet of the apartheid government. In this verse, as Opland says, Yali-Manisi deploys metaphors denigrating Mathanzima's greed and his entire homeland enterprise:

> So I speak of you, Daliwonga,
> Leopard hunter who roused a python
> Otter snatcher with tortoise as bait
> Who studied and studied until he burped up[282]

So, the 'Leopard hunter' and the 'Otter snatcher' are hunters of skill but the outcomes are entirely different to the intention. The 'Leopard Hunter' rouses a python, something entirely

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[280] *Omeros*, 12.

[281] D. L. P. Yali-Manisi, *D.L.P. Yali-Manisi imbongi entsha: Iimbali Zamanyange = Historical Poems*, ed. Jeff Opland, trans. Jeff Opland and Pamela Maseko, Publications of the Opland Collection of Xhosa literature, v. 2 (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 6, (from now on D.L.P. Yali-Manisi with the page number).

[282] *D.L.P. Yali-Manisi* (above), 16.

different and of a different order of danger to that which he intended to catch. The 'Otter hunter' uses entirely the wrong sort of bait. But here is another example by Yali-Manisi taken from his epic poem 'Mlanjeni's War' which demonstrates the skilful way Xhosa poets use metaphor in a satirical manner:

> Smith went preening on his way
> Like a baboon stuffed with a stolen pumpkin
> But in treating the Mbombo he'd shat himself.[283]

Smith, as Opland explains, is Sir Harry Smith, governor at the Cape from 1847 to 1852. The passage refers to his bullying attempts to intimidate Ndlambe, one of the Xhosa leaders and how this rebounded on him.

In 'Rivonia' I try to make use of all of these different poetic traditions to mythologise the hero figure, Nelson Mandela. I open the 'Prologue' in the manner of a Xhosa praise singer using animal and natural imagery comparing Mandela to a bull elephant of almost supernatural presence:

> This is a poem about the elephant of the Thembu.
> The great bull who knocked down apartheid.
> He, whose tusks gleamed in the sunlight,
> whose eyes lit up the darkness.
> He, whose bellowing awoke his countrymen,[284]

Dreams are a central feature of Judeo/Christian and Bantu religious traditions. In the Old Testament, Jacob dreams of a ladder ascending to heaven and Pharaoh is troubled by dreams. So, in my section 'The Prosecutor retires to his study' the Prosecutor, who is about to ask the judge to impose the death sentence on Mandela and his fellow defendants, is troubled by a dream of an incident which happened in his youth and which he believes was a divine punishment for violating the Sabbath:

> 'Ah my fingers! In the pit of the night
> They point at me. Shouting and accusing
> My dreams drag me back to my father's butcher shop
> A brash young fool playing the fool

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[283] D.L.P. Yali-Manisi, 83.

[284] 'Rivonia' from 'the Prologue'.

Sneaking into the shop during Shabbat
Breaking the Law and shaming my parents
Just because I wanted to go to the movies'[285]

This leads him to think that the dream is a warning from heaven that he is about to transgress again. The eland is a central element in San mythology. In 'In the Judge's chambers', I found I was able to introduce it in an almost mystical way by having the judge accidentally re-encounter an ancient San cave painting of an eland, which his revered grandfather had encountered. I was also able to integrate the mystical encounter his grandfather had with the eland with biblical imagery prophesying the appearance of Mandela before the judge. This led the judge to recall a message his grandfather had given to him about a trial he would preside at:

'He used to put me on his knee
And tell me stories with the same ending
"Kleintjie," he would say. "A shoot
from the stump of Jesse will come before you
And you must know him for who he is
Trust in God, and choose the righteous path
For the fate of our people is in your hands"'
. . .
'I woke late and explored my shelter
How long had humans come here?
What stories were told, what dances danced?
The painter's art had captured them. The walls
Fervent with hunters, dancers and antelope
In the centre a great Eland presided. Beneath
On the floor, a shattered watch engraved "J. J. de Wet"'

'Thank you for coming to see me, Mr Prosecutor
You have reminded me of words I had long forgotten
"I have set before you, life and death
Blessing and cursing; therefore choose life

[285] 'Rivonia' – From 'The Prosecutor retires to his study.'

that both thou and thy seed may live"[286]

The way I must take is now clear to me
I shall drink from the cup of clemency[287]

I have spent some time examining how myth forms an essential element of epic poetry, how the stature of the hero figure is dependent on his association with myths of one sort or another, and how epic-minded poets set about using myth in their poems. But why do this? Why is it important for an epic poem to have a hero or heroine who is more than human, who is indeed of epic stature? My answer forms another response to Adorno's statement about poetry which I am, for the purpose of this commentary, applying to epic poetry. Adorno wrote his statement in 1949 when the fires of war were still smoking, and the world was still reeling from the shock of the holocaust. His statement is pessimistic in the extreme. Barbarism has triumphed. There is nothing that critics, philosophers or poets can do or say in response to the destruction of half of Europe, the holocaust, the deaths of millions, the terrible cataclysms of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The German/Jewish poet Paul Celan could barely bring himself to write in his mother tongue, and when he did, it came out like this:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink[288]

But 'black milk' is not a drink the epic-minded poet is partial to. His or her concern is with regrowth and restoration. Epic is concerned with good governance and restoration of the social order. The theme of many epics is disruption of the social order, how this occurs and the catastrophic consequences when it happens, but also how such disruption can be prevented or rectified, and the role of the epic hero in bringing reconciliation and even redemption to the warring factions, not simply by physical strength and military prowess but by his or her human qualities, wisdom, compassion and grace.

Homer opens *The Iliad* by saying that it is about the 'wrath of Achilles' brought on by Agamemnon's abuse of power:

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[286] Deuteronomy 30:19 KJV.

[287] 'Rivonia' – 'In the Judges Chambers'.

[288] Paul Celan, 'Death Fugue', *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan,* translated and edited by John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 31.

Then looking darkly at him Achilleus of the swift feet spoke:
"O wrapped in shamelessness, with your mind forever on profit,
How shall any one of the Achaians readily obey you [289]

Towards the end of the *Iliad*, after the near defeat of the Greeks, Agamemnon comes to regret his abuse of power. Achilles also pays for his tempestuous behaviour and finds some redemption when he allows Priam to take Hector's body away for burial.

It is an indication of the abiding relevance of epic poetry that both Homer and the *Beowulf* poet have much to say to us in the 21st century. Both poets lived in tribal societies, where tribal and internecine rivalries wreaked havoc. This is not dissimilar to our own times when we find that far from being subsumed within larger national identities, these rivalries seem to have re-emerged from the past, and lie simmering just below the surface. The *Beowulf* poet makes social disruption a central theme of the poem and Grendel and his mother are excellent metaphors for it. After their deaths, when peace and order can finally be restored to Heorot, the grateful Hrothgar counsels Beowulf, as he prepares to return to Geatland, on the correct behaviour of a wise leader:

. . . . Beowulf my friend,
your fame has gone far and wide
you are known everywhere. In all things you are even tempered,
prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship
we exchanged before. Forever you will be
your people's mainstay and your warrior's helping hand.
Heremod was different,
the way he behaved to Ecgwala's sons.
His rise in the world brought little joy
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,
killed his own comrades, a pariah king
who cut himself off from his own kind,
even though Almighty God had made him
eminent and powerful from the start
for a happy life. But a change happened,

[289] *Iliad* – Lattimore trans, 1 ll. 148 – 150.

he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
to honour the Danes. He suffered in the end
For having plagued his people for so long:
his life lost happiness.
So learn from this
and understand true values. I who tell you
have wintered in wisdom.[290]

An epic hero must be wise as well as strong, the *Beowulf* poet observes through Hrothgar. Physical strength alone cannot bring peace. Power must be exercised wisely. Comradeship must be nurtured. Allies must be sought, and friendships maintained through gifts if destructive forces are to be kept at bay. At the end of the poem, the *Beowulf* poet returns to this theme. The lay for Beowulf's death is fittingly sung by a woman 'with hair bound up.' It is she who captures in verse the dismay of the Geats at the death of their heroic leader, who had, by following Hrothgar's advice, succeeded in giving them many years of peace, and their grim and uncertain prospects without his leadership:

That death they grieved with dirges, sorrow,
One death-lay sung by a woman, who. . .
. . . with hair bound up . . .
sang grief's concern, whose song expressed
her fear that time would fill with terror –
vicious invasion, vile kidnap, killing,
humiliation. Heaven swallowed the smoke[291]

This is the wisdom the epic-minded poet must pass to future generations. Many epics end on a redemptive note promising some relief from war or chaos. 'Shantih shantih shantih' – 'The peace which passeth understanding'[292] Eliot intones at the end of *The Waste Land*, choosing words that traditionally end an Upanishad. In Walcott's *Omeros,* Philoctete's wound is cured, Achille and Hector reconcile their quarrel and Helen returns to Achille bearing a child which may be Hector's:

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[290] Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf : A New Verse Translation* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), 119, (ll. 1704 – 1725). From now on – Heaney, *Beowulf* with the page number.

[291] *Beowulf: A translation and a Reading*, translated by Chris McCully (Manchester: Carcanet, 2018), 122, (3149 – 3155).

[292] *The Waste Land,* 79 and 86.

He liked the odours

of the sea in him. Night was fanning its coalpot
from one catching star. The No Pain lit its doors
in the village. Achille put the wedge of dolphin

that he'd saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin.
A full moon shone like a slice of raw onion.
When he left the beach the sea was still going on.[293]

Earlier in this section of the commentary, I quoted Johns Putra on the need for the epic hero to maintain a balance between *kleios and nostos;* a glorious death in the heat of battle, and the homecoming to a life of peace. Gregory Nagy develops this idea in greater detail:

> The monolithic personality of Achilles, supreme epic hero of the *Iliad* is matched against the many-sidedness of Odysseus, the commensurately supreme hero of the *Odyssey.* Whereas Achilles achieves his epic supremacy as a warrior, Odysseus achieves his own kind of epic supremacy in an alternative way, as a master of crafty stratagem and cunning intelligence. . . . In the case of the *Iliad,* this epic not only tells the story it says it will tell, about Achilles' anger and how it led to countless woes as the Greeks went on fighting it out with the Trojans and striving to ward off the fiery onslaught of Hector . . .
> The Homeric *Odyssey* is equally comprehensive. It tells the story of the Hero's *nostos* "return, homecoming." This word means not only "homecoming" but also "song about homecoming." . . .In other words, the *Odyssey* is the final and definitive statement about the theme of a heroic homecoming: the process of retelling the return of the epic hero Odysseus, the narrative of the *Odyssey* achieves a sense of closure in the retelling of all feats stemming from the heroic age. . . .
> As we see from the wording of the Song of the Sirens in the *Odyssey,* the sheer pleasure of listening to the Song of Troy, that is the *Iliad* will be in vain if there is no *nostos,* no safe return from the faraway home of epic heroes: . . .
> As we see from Albert Lord's far-ranging survey of typological parallels to the theme of the epic hero's return in the Homeric *Odyssey* the idea of *nostos* is deeply ritualistic. In fact the *nostos* of Odysseus in *the Odyssey* means not only a "return" or a "song about a return" but even a "return to light and life". This ritualistic meaning, as we will see, has to do

[293] *Omeros,* 325.

> with the epic "hidden agenda" of *returning from Hades* and the heroic theme of *immortalisation after death.* [294]

The epic-minded poet is aware that to drink the 'black milk of daybreak' is to despair of humanity's capacity for healing and revival, and the redemptive possibility of the appearance of an epic hero be it man or woman. It is to accept that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. However, he or she is also aware of the 'hidden agenda' of epic, and of his or her duty of epic-mindedness. As Walcott says, epic-minded poets have a duty to 'look about them' and to curate heroic narratives of *nostos,* of redemption and homecoming from the 'ruins' of their culture, history and biography.

Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill were both flawed men and flawed politicians, yet somehow they arrived on the scene at the right time. To say that it was they alone who saved their countries from disaster and barbarism would be wrong, yet they had something heroic and something of the mythical within them which men and women followed despite their differences. That something is what epic-minded poets continue to explore. It is a reason why epic poetry needs to be written after Auschwitz and it is one of the reasons why I have written 'Rivonia.'

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[294] Gregory Nagy, 'The Epic Hero', in *A Companion to Ancient Epic,* ed. John Miles Foley, (Oxford; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 79. From now on *A Companion to Ancient Epic* with the page number.

The epic-minded poet's engagement with history and truth

In March 1980 the poet and critic Alastair Reid interviewed Luis Borges at the New York Pen Club, on the occasion of Borges' 80th birthday:

> Reid: Again, it begins with the phrase you once said, really crucially: "I don't write fiction. I invent fact."
>
> Borges: I think that sentence is a gift from you and I thank you.
>
> Reid: Shall we suppose for a moment that you once said that?
>
> Borges: It's good if I did.
>
> Reid: Yes, I think it's very likely that you did.
>
> Borges: Who knows? I may be guilty of that sentence.
>
> Reid: Guilty?
>
> Borges: Well, not guilty but I wonder if I can live up to that sentence.
>
> Reid: What would you say is the difference? I don't write fiction. I invent fact.
>
> Borges: I suppose there is no difference between fact and fiction.
>
> Reid: This is a fairly radical point of view to express this evening.
>
> Borges: Well, solipsism or the past, what is the past but all memory? What is the past but memories that have become myth?[295]

Between them Borges and Reid put their finger on two of the problems that confront the epic-minded poet who wants to write historically based narrative poetry. The first concerns how the poet finds the materials for his or her narratives. Do they come from the histories and myths of their tribe, from the literary canon or, as is increasingly the case, from personal and public narratives arising out of civil war, social turmoil and racial, religious or sexual prejudice? The second is having selected these materials, to what extent can the poet remake or reimagine so-called 'factual or historical truth and events' in order to reveal a more profound truth or perhaps an emotional or imaginative truth? I propose to address these questions in this section of my commentary.

In book VIII of *The Odyssey*, the Phaecian King Alkinoos summons his inspired singer Demodokus to entertain his guest, the wanderer Odysseus. The hall goes quiet:

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[295] Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges At Eighty: Conversations*, ed. Willis Barnstone (New York: New Directions Books, 2013), 117.

The muse stirred the singer to sing the famous actions of men on that venture, whose fame goes to the wide heaven, the quarrel between Odysseus and Peleus' son Achilles.[296]

Demodokus, who like Homer is blind, is clearly a bard of great skill. Here Demodokus is presented by Homer as reworking events which could only have taken place within the span of his memory. Odysseus, who has not yet revealed his identity, finds himself in a strange position. He is listening to himself and his companions being mythologised; to events in which he was a participant and of which he has first-hand knowledge, being re-imagined and re-interpreted, to new truths being woven.

This process must have been part of the ancient tradition of oral poetry because it is also used to great effect by the *Beowulf* poet. After *Beowulf* has slain Grendel there is a feast in Hrothgar's hall. The old ruler's bard improvises a new song by redacting traditional material and mixing it with contemporary history, with the story of Beowulf's own exploits and with myth:

> . . . Meanwhile a thane
> of the king's household, a carrier of tales,
> a traditional singer deeply schooled
> in the lore of the past, linked a new theme
> to a strict metre. The man started
> to recite with skill, rehearsing Beowulf's
> triumphs and feats in well fashioned lines,
> entwining his word.
> He told what he had heard
> repeated in songs about Sigemund's exploits,
> all of those many feats and marvels,
> the struggles and wanderings of Waels' son,
> . . .[297]

Here then is confirmation that the practice of poets weaving new narratives from contemporary exploits and events of heroic nature, is of great antiquity. Is there any reason why contemporary epic-minded poets should not follow it? But the task in our times is much more difficult: there are infinitely more sources, more witnesses, more documentation and there is also more competition from story-tellers in other media, as well as from journalists, biographers, historians and novelists. However, the method the epic-minded poet uses in re-working and re-imagining

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[296] Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer.*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 123.

[297] Heaney, *Beowulf,* 59, (866 – 878).

events, is different to that of the historian, the biographer, the memoirist and even the novelist. The poet is under no compunction to rely on evidence, to be objective or to be concerned with realism or other forms of verisimilitude. J. R. R. Tolkien makes this point about the *Beowulf* poet:

> The illusion of historical truth and perspective that has made Beowulf seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art. The author has used an instinctive historical sense - a part indeed of the ancient English temper…, of which Beowulf is a supreme expression; but he has used it with a poetical and not a historical object.[298]

That is what Browning did when he took the collection of material that had providentially fallen into his hands and which he called 'the old yellow book,'[299] added other research, and reworked his material into *The Ring and the Book*. The development and use of dramatic monologues by Browning, Tennyson and others, as a technique for the exploration of the human in his or her historical circumstance and a tool for the exposure of a more complex emotional truth, provided the narrative poet with an exciting and flexible new form. Riede puts it thus:

> The form enabled Browning to explore the psychological depths that had been opened up by Romantic poetry, but without the egotism of talking about his own inner depths, or the overarching ambition of formulating universal truths about the relation of the individual mind to the cosmos.[300]

But in fashioning *The Ring and the Book,* Browning had to depart from the historical record. He had to fill in the lacunae of history. This tension between the strictly factual historic record which the dry depositions and legal opinions of 'the old yellow book' provided, and his poetic sensibility and imagination, enabled him to develop a poetic interpretation of events which he believed was a more profound representation of truth. At its heart was a belief in something akin to spiritual guidance, for Browning felt the whole process by which 'the old yellow book' fell into his hands was mysterious. He believed that something more than mere chance had guided him

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[298] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and The Critics and Other Essays,* ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 7.

[299] *The Ring And The Book*, 11.

[300] David G Riede, 'The Victorian Era', in *The Columbia History of British Poetry,* Carl Woodring and James Shapiro, eds., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 432.

to his raw material, the subject matter of his narrative. It was almost as if a mutual selection process had taken place.

On a sunny June day in 1860, while his wife Elizabeth was confined to her rooms during her final illness, Browning wandered through a second-hand market in the Piazza di San Lorenzo in Florence when he stopped at a second hand bookstall and his eye was caught by a small book bound with yellow vellum, or as he described it:

> Do you see this square old yellow book, I toss
> I' the air and catch it again, and twirl it about
> by the crumpled vellum covers, - pure crude fact
> Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
> And brains, high blooded, ticked two centuries since?
> Examine it yourselves! I found this book,
> Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,
> (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
> Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
> One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm
> Across a Square in Florence , crammed with booths,
> ….
> From these … Oh, with a Lionard going cheap
> If it should prove , as promised , that Joconde
> Whereof a copy contents the Louvre! – these
> I picked the book from. Five compeers in flank
> Stood left and right of it as tempting more –
> I picked this book from them.[301]

The Book which he purchased for *'a lira',* had been assembled by an unknown person and contained a mixture of depositions, legal arguments, witness statements and notes, both printed and manuscript. Its subject was an infamous, but long forgotten, murder case which had been a *cause celebre* in Rome two centuries previously. Browning started to read it while walking home and within minutes he was hooked. Here, presented uniquely to him, was new raw material of a dramatic nature from which he knew he could fashion a long narrative poem – perhaps even an epic. Notice that he calls it '. . . pure crude fact // Secreted from a man's life when hearts beat

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[301] *The Ring And The Book,* 24 – 25, ll. 33 – 37.

hard,' as though it was some precious ore or fluid won from the earth. Notice also how he considers that he was guided to the book providentially - '(Mark the predestination!) when a hand'. Even so, Browning only started to write the poem in 1864, and he allegedly offered it to other poets including Tennyson who all turned it down, feeling instinctively that this story was Browning's to tell. As Altick says:

> The material in this battered square volume, he saw at a glance, was almost providentially designed to engage a man of his intellectual curiosity and tastes.[302]

But before the narratives could be re-told they needed to be reworked and reimagined. Just as a goldsmith who receives a nugget or bar of pure gold must then melt it down and remake it into something else in his or her craftsman's imagination, so the epic-minded poet must rework and reimagine the facts and events which are his or her raw material. It is in this reworking process that the poet's craft is fully realised, and it must be understood that the poet is not writing journalism, history or biography. He or she is seeking to make something finer and more enduring. The epic-minded poet uses his or her skills to reveal a different, an imaginative and emotional truth. Cundiff expounds this view in 'The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor':

> Browning accepts ART as the one possible way of speaking truth. His artistic way is through the addition of "fancy" or imagination, which is God-given, like the gift of prophet and seer, and possessed only by those "called of God." Final truth, which God alone is capable of revealing, is for Browning, the only goal worth striving toward.[303]

And Buckler, in his introduction to *Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's The Ring and The Book,* writes:

> As the poet-speaker's recollection of his discovery of The Old Yellow Book in Lorenzo square that June day is made inseparable from all the ambient circumstances so the various characters speak under the strongest sense of time, place and circumstance , and in rendering their personal testimony- consciously or unconsciously, manipulatively or inadvertently – they create thousands of images of their temporal, spatial and attitudinal locus in a world that however metaphoric is particularised and peculiar to their story…. *The Ring and the Book* is poetry not history, but it is planted in historical illusion. That

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[302] *The Ring and the Book,* 11.

[303] Paul A. Cundiff, "The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor," PMLA 63, no. 4 (December 1948), 1281. http://www.jstor.org/stable/459615 accessed on 27th June 2015, (from now on referred to as 'Cundiff' with the page number).

palpable ambience is the medium from which its feeder roots draw the nutrients, the life force upon which the illusion and hence the poetry depends.[304]

Browning considered this concept so important to his poetic method, and so central to the understanding of *The Ring and the Book,* that he devotes the opening pages of his poem to a complex metaphor explaining the mysterious process in poetic terms. The metaphor (really two interrelated metaphors) compares the way a goldsmith uses the properties of honey, wax and gold to make a more beautiful artefact, a ring (the ring of truth) and the reimagining and reworking process by which the poet expands and transforms 'pure crude fact' coming eventually to a composite truth, which Browning believed was higher than the truths expounded in the depositions and arguments of the lawyers.

Do you see this ring?
'T is Rome-work made to match
(By Castellani's imitative craft)
Etrurian circlets found some happy morn
….. There's one trick
(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device
And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold
As this was, - such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendant tear
At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow, -
To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap:
….
That Trick is, the artificer melts up wax
With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works.
…. But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh but there's repristination! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains

[304] William Earl Buckler, *Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book,"* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 5.

…
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore
Prime nature with an added artistry –
No carat lost and you have gained a ring. [305]

The first metaphor involves substances produced by the artificer of nature, the honey bee: wax and honey. Both substances are found 'at beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow'. Both are substances which men have used from ancient times. Honey was a preservative and sweetener, used in the making of sweetmeats and fermented drinks, something to bring joy to life and also, when used in embalming the dead, something to preserve the facsimile of life. But honey also has sacred literary associations, as Wright explains:

> Honey's sacred and literary associations are found in many cultures, some familiar others less so. It is associated with speech, and especially eloquence and song. Sophocles, Plato, Pindar, Virgil and Lucan are all said to have had their lips touched with honey during infancy.[306]

Wax is a malleable substance, a sealant, a stopper for gourds and bottles, a polish and preserver of wood and leather but also, and perhaps more importantly in this context, a palimpsest upon which histories can be written and re-written. The third substance which is crucial to the fashioning of the metaphor is gold, which is not a product of nature but an element, a constituent part of nature. Gold is found as nuggets, glittering in the beds of streams and rivers, or smelted from rocks as 'oozings from the mine'. It shares similar qualities to wax and honey, colour and malleability. It has been a precious substance from the dawn of time. Gold is one of the most enduring of metals. It does not rust or tarnish like iron or silver and it is also one of the easiest of metals to work, to shape into a pendant or ring. Browning makes the connection between the two by association in a crucial simile within the metaphor:

… such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendant tear
At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow

But the whole awakes in the reader the feeling of a luxuriant ripening and fecundity, of creativity and the divine source of poetic inspiration. The second part of the metaphor compares the

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[305] *The Ring and the Book* Book I, ll. 1- 25.

[306]Jane Wright, "Browning's Honeycomb," *Essays in Criticism* 63, no. 3 (July 2013) 275–97.

refashioning of the found substances into a new article in the goldsmiths forge and workshop to the poet's re-imagining and re-working his 'facts' and events into new narratives:

> the artificer melts up wax
> With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
> With gold's alloy, and duly tempering both,
> Effects a manageable mass, then works.

For all his textual ingenuity and skill and indeed the poetic integrity of the metaphor, Browning did not entirely succeed in convincing his critics that his reimagining was justifiable or truthful. He received a good deal of opprobrium for allegedly mishandling of the source material in 'the old yellow book'. Many people devoted time and effort to finding other historical records of the trial, in an attempt to debunk Browning's characterisations. Cundiff says that some people thought Browning 'flagrantly dishonest and unjust'[307] and goes on to quote one as saying in a 1927 essay about Browning and his critics, "They permit him to weave a conscienceless web of falsity."[308] Others scrutinised his complex metaphor too literally, as though it were an allegory, debating whether it was the gold, the honey or the forge which represented poetic inspiration, or taking issue with the minutiae of its scientific accuracy. But Browning's ring metaphor, or any metaphor for that matter, cannot be subjected to this sort of quasi-scientific scrutiny or it starts to separate into its constituent parts. Come too close to a Cezanne or a Van Gogh and you will see only a befuddling blur of shapes and colours. Step back, look at the whole and the integrity of the painting emerges.

Browning was not going to faithfully rehearse a dusted and polished version of the factual material from 'the old yellow book'. Furthermore, this material comprised depositions prepared by lawyers for Roman courts at the time and were no doubt heavily biased in favour of their clients or, to use a 21st Century idiom, airbrushed and somewhat economical with the truth. Looked at in that light, Browning's claim to have accessed an equally valid or even higher truth, might appear justified. But Browning also lays claim, at least in *The Ring and the Book,* to another means of verification: the power to communicate with the dead. This arcane power was reserved in pagan cultures for the shaman and the sorcerer and in classical times for the seer, exemplified by the Sybils at the oracles of Delphi and Cumae. In Judeo /Christian culture there are references to the practice in Old and New Testaments. Browning asserts to his readers that he is

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[307] Cundiff 1277.

[308] Cundiff 1277.

entitled to join this august company on his own merits because of his craft, the power of his imagination, and because the muse is with him:

> Lovers of dead truth, did you fare the worse?
> Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?
> (I, 697-8)

And he begins to explore the way in which this mysterious means of communication can be mixed with other 'truth' by the poet's creative gift:

> This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
> That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
> ….
> Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
> The somehow may be this how
> (I, 701 - 706)

The power to 'quicken' or to give life to inert material was claimed by the alchemist and magician. Shakespeare uses the word:

> I have seen a medicine
> That's able to breathe life into a stone,
> Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary[309]

and so too does the philosopher Novalis who talks of the superior mind's ability to 'quicken inert nature' and to achieve for the first time 'true insight into the body- mind – world, life – death and the world of spirits.'[310] Browning then goes on to develop this idea of the poet as a mage of sorts (found in Novalis) holding that the poet's power to create derives from the divine power of the Creator:

> I find first
> Writ down for very A.B.C of fact,
> "In the beginning God made heaven and earth;"
> ….

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[309] W. Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well, 2:1:72-5.*

[310] ' Logological Fragments 2', *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, tr Margaret Mahony Stoljar,(New York, State University of New York Press:1997), 75. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=OQsMWQEMslQC&pg=PA75&lpg=PA75&dq=quicken+inert+matter+novalis&source accessed on 4/8/2015.

Man , - as befits the made, the inferior thing,-
Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn
Yet forced to try and make else fail to grow –
….
That although nothing which had never life
Shall get life from him, not having been,
Yet something dead may get to live again
Something with too much life or not enough,
Which, either way imperfect, ended once:

(I, 708 – 31)

And that while humans are 'purposed' 'to grow' as a necessary part of their spiritual progression but they cannot create life, only revive what once had life:

These indeed let him breathe on and relume!
For such man's feat is, in the due degree,
- Mimic creation, galvanism for life,

(I, 738 – 40)

Browning reaches into literature, myth and science for allusions which give substance to his argument, which man may 'breathe on and relume!' but this only serves to emphasise how inferior to the divine, human powers of creativity are. Othello, in despair as he considers his dreadful murder of Desdemona says: "I know not where is that Promethean heat// That can thy light relume."[311] And 'galvanism' refers to the phenomenon, discovered by Luigi Galvani in the 1790s, that a frog's leg will twitch if subjected to an electric current.[312] But to Browning these only 'mimic creation'; the true nature of a poet's art is subtler and more profound:

Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust's
Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was it not Elisha once-
Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face?
There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up

311 W. Shakespeare, *Othello,* (V:II:3313 – 4).

312 Experiments were carried out on dead bodies to see if they could be brought to life and this phenomenon forms the premise of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm:
And he returned, walked to and from the house,
And went up, stretched him upon the flesh again,
And the eyes opened. 'Tis a credible feat
With the right man and way.

(I, 759 – 773)

Browning turns to the mythical superman Dr Faust and to his poetic creator Goethe but then rejects the comparison. In doing this, Browning is highlighting a key issue. Faust is a creature of magic whose power derives from Mephistopheles. Browning is not in the business of necromancy, of giving credence to satanical or magical figures. He deals with real people and events, which happened in historical time and for which documentation or evidence still exists. That is why *The Ring and the Book* has special interest for the epic-minded poet and why I think it a flint from which sparks may be struck. Browning writes about the collision between the tectonic plates of myth and history, what is remembered, what forgotten, what passes into the cultural memory, what the poet must recover from the underworld. For an epic-minded poet the range of reimagined truths rises from the bedrock of historical facts and events like the Alps. Exploring these truths in relation to the fall of the apartheid regime is what I am trying to achieve with 'Rivonia'.

Browning was always keenly aware of the delicate balance between revelatory and evidential truth. This can be seen in the above passage, where he repeats the extraordinary story of Elisha the prophet (in preference to Faustian hocus-pocus) almost verbatim from the St James' version of the second book of Kings. The Bible contains three references to the raising of the dead: the 'witch' of Endor, who King Saul asked to summon the shade of the prophet Samuel; Elisha and the son of the Shunamite women, who Browning writes of (above); and Jesus and Lazarus.

The raising of Lazarus, as a divine action, is outside the scope of human agency for the reason Browning puts forward in lines 759– 773 which I quote above. The account of the raising of the spirit of Samuel appears in the first book of Samuel. Saul, on a downward spiral to self-destruction, and facing an invasion by the Philistines, wants to consult his old mentor, the prophet Samuel, who has died. In breach of his own edicts suppressing all divination, he seeks

out a 'woman who divines by a ghost'[313] (the literal translation from the Hebrew). Samuel's ghost appears and prophesies Saul's death in the forthcoming battle. This sort of necromancy is notably Faustian and Browning rejects it. Mephistopheles was always a liar, and not to be trusted. As far as Browning is concerned, the spirit of Count Guido Franchescini conjured up by a necromancer, is no more likely to speak the truth to him, than the live Guido Franschecini was to tell the truth in his depositions to the Florentine court.

The account of the prophet Elisha's raising of the dead son of the Shunammite woman comes from a different place altogether. Firstly, it is carried out with divine sanction because Elisha prays before acting. Secondly, Elisha revives the man in a way which is somewhere between a medical procedure and a sexual act, warming the dead man with his own flesh, placing his mouth against the dead man's and breathing into the man's mouth and the man opens his eyes just as in Genesis, God breathes the breath of life into Adams nostrils. As Browning says: 'Tis a credible feat // With the right man and way.'

Browning believed that he was that 'right man' and that the combination of poetic inspiration, his skill as a poet, and the use of dramatic monologue allowed him to do something which had not been done before: to re-animate voices from the past so that they could tell their version of the truth to the present. If *The Ring and the Book* is considered as a whole, with its various voices each speaking and each rehearsing his or her story, what we have is a series of stages upon which we can observe different facets of the narrative. This enables us to form our own opinion of their veracity or otherwise. Browning's is a thoroughly modern, relativistic way of looking at history which understands that there is no absolute truth. Browning's truth is that the characters in *The Ring and The Book* come alive through his poetic skill. What he presents to us are not ghosts, nor are they simulacra or zombies, but autonomous living, breathing, flesh and blood.

Pound also understood that an epic-minded poet needed to have discourse with the dead - to voyage to the underworld. In his opening *Canto*, he makes a giant leap backward in time to Homer and Odysseus' voyage to the underworld, to try, like Schliemann, to recover some treasure in the ruins of Troy. Like Eliot, Pound was an admirer of Browning, saying that he 'had no French or English parallel' and that '*The Ring and the Book* is a serious experimentation,'[314] but

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[313] I Samuel 28:7, *The Soncino Books of the Bible: Samuel,* edited and translated by The Rev. Dr. S Goldman (London, New York: The Soncino Press, 1949), 168.

[314] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 33.

he only acknowledged Browning's influence on his own work obliquely. Consider this extract from the foreword to his own selection from his *Cantos*, which he made and edited for Faber & Faber (*Selected Cantos of Ezra Pound)* when he was 81, six years before his death:

> The best introduction to the Cantos and to the present selection of passages might be the following lines from the earlier draft of a Canto (1912), reprinted in the fiftieth memorial issue of 'Poetry' (Chicago).
>
> "Hang it all, there can be but one 'Sordello'!
> But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
> Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-form,
> Your Sordello, and that the modern world
> Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in;
> Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery
> As fresh sardines slapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles?
> (I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth
> Is inside this discourse – this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.)
> Ezra Pound
> Venice, 20th October 1966[315]

'Sordello' in line one references Browning's long poem of that name written in 1840 about the 13th century troubadour poet Sordello da Goito, who Pound was also interested in. In 'Troubadours – Their Sorts and Conditions' Pound says:

> Dante and Browning have created so much interest in Sordello that it may not be amiss to give the brief account of him as it stands in a manuscript in the Ambrosian library at Milan.[316]

He then goes on to provide a sizeable biography. But the 'your whole bag of tricks' in line three, and the 'Your Sordello' in line four, are almost like jibes addressed directly to Browning. Bloom explored the strange and sometimes almost *Oedipal* relationship between poets and those they regard as their poetic precursors:

> My concern is only with strong poets, major figures, with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize;

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[315] *Selected Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 9.

[316] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 97.

> figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realisation that he has failed to create himself.[317]

Pound acknowledges Browning as his strong precursor, not with excessive deference, but with some wry criticism and a touch of humour. 'Make it New' Pound famously said, borrowing an ancient Chinese motto,[318] but he does not follow his own advice. So, the *imagiste* metaphor which he presents in this foreword to his selection from his *Cantos*, of his bringing multiple narratives fresh and new, trawled from the ocean of stories like a fisherman's catch and then dumped in the market place, is not a new metaphor. It has been used by many other poets and prophets in many other times and places. Jesus uses it, and so does Shakespeare. But this is a key to Pound's method of selecting the material of his narratives. Unlike Browning, who believes they fall providentially into his hand, Pound trawls history for them. For Pound, it is the narratives created by those of his poet predecessors for whom he has highest regard, which have the power and the poetic resonance to be recycled and used in his own epic narratives. So, he trawls Virgil, Horace, Pindar, the Renaissance soldier poet Sigismundo Malatesta, Confucius, the poet and troubadour Guido Cavalcanti, Dante and many others. But he starts in the familiar seas of the Western Canon. He begins his wanderings with Odysseus, strangely not from the original Greek of Homer, but from a translation made by Andreas Divas of Justinopolis in 1538. Although Pound, like Browning, claims that his method reveals a form of truth - as he says above, using his metaphor of 'the catcher of fish' (as opposed to Browning's 'ring metaphor') but it would appear, at least according to Terrell, that Pound worked in a way that was diametrically opposite to Browning:

> Most of the time Pound acts only as a recorder putting down what the hundreds of characters in the poem actually did and said. He believes that professional historians have mythified and falsified the past. Thus he goes always to the original records and documents. If the fact exists, he will find it. . . . Pound did his best to obtain the best authority available and never falsifies the record. But sometimes his use of the record is biased. . . . [319]

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[317] *The Anxiety Of Influence*, 5.

[318] Michael North, 'The Making of "Make It New"', - *Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics*, accessed 23 November 2016, https://www.guernicamag.com/features/the-making-of-making-it-new/. accessed on 23/11/2016.

[319] Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993) xiv.

Whereas Pound was dramatic and forthright about the sources of his narratives, Eliot was subtle and somewhat devious. Perhaps the late addition of the 'Notes on the Waste Land' at the end of the poem was a ruse or an elaborate joke. It does indicate the complexity of Eliot's character and thought processes, as do the lines 'These Fragments have I shored against my ruin'.[320] The fragments in the cacophony of voices from humankind, from nature and the supernatural that fill the poem cannot be re-assembled into any sort of whole, just as Pound's catch has been wrenched from its home in the ocean of literature and cannot be returned. But when you compare the voices and narratives of *The Waste Land* to those of *The Cantos* it becomes apparent how much more attuned Eliot was to contemporary social history and popular voice than Pound. Pound relies for his material on literary sources from his trawling of the margins of the European Canon, Eliot from the ether of common speech.

Where for instance does Eliot get the sophisticated middle European voice which opens 'Burial of the Dead' and seems to catch within its timbre a whole class of European nobility swept away by war and revolution?

> Summer surprised us coming over the Starnbergersee
> With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
> And went on into the Hofgarten…[321]

Or indeed where did he find Madam Sosostris, or Phlebus the Phoenician 'who was once handsome and tall as you,' (L. 321) - the wandering mariner like and unlike Odysseus, whose presence reminds us of our affinity to the lost voyagers of antiquity while simultaneously referencing the unfortunate drowned sailor of the Tarot pack? Does Lil's unkind friend in the 'A Game of Chess' - 'Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.' (L. 143) - come from snatches of conversation overheard in the typing pool of the bank where he worked, or the London pubs he frequented? Was the world-weary secretary of 'The Fire Sermon' too detached to resist the 'small house agent's clerk', a girl Eliot had his eye on, or the subject of a braggart's tale told to him by an acquaintance? Something in these found and heard conversations resonates with Eliot. Much more than Pound he is the flâneur, his ear attuned to the narratives of the city, recognising in them some source of strangeness and power as he adds them to his hoard of 'fragments'. As Bessinger, Tyler and Woodford remark:

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[320] *The Waste Land*, 45.

[321] *The Waste Land* ll 8 – 10.

> Ultimately, epic poets, be they oral or literary all create. They manipulate devices and techniques by which their art is revealed, whether these devices are orally transmitted or rooted in literacy. They all seek to tell a good story: to relate a narrative, that it is hoped, will light a fire, touch a soul, entertain for an evening (be it with book in hand or grouped round a singer), or even change the destiny of a nation.[322]

That is what Antjie Krog does when she reworks transcripts from the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, her own personal experiences and other narratives into a harrowing account of the dying throes of apartheid South Africa which she called *Country of My Skull:*

> 'Hey Antjie, but this is not quite what happened at the workshop,' says Patrick.
> 'Yes I know, it's a new story that I constructed from all the other information I picked up over the months about people's reactions and psychologists advice….
> 'But then you're not busy with the truth!'
> 'I am busy with the truth…my truth. Of Course, its quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen in my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I am telling the story to. In every story there is hearsay, there is a grouping together of things that didn't necessarily happen together, there are assumptions, there are exaggerations to bring home the enormities of situations, there is downplaying to confirm innocence. And all of this together makes up the whole country's truth. So also the lies and the stories that date from earlier times.'[323]

But is Krog's interrogator Patrick right to question what the poet is doing? Is it permissible for a poet to play around with these sorts of facts, in order to develop a narrative which may reveal a more complex and multi-faceted truth? The Afrikaans writer and critic André Brink said in 'Interrogating Silence' that, 'women as a presence are largely excluded from official South African discourses.'[324] Nevertheless, South Africa has had many notable women writers, Olive Schreiner and the Nobel prize winner Nadine Gordimer being perhaps the best known. So, who is Antjie Krog and why does she claim entitlement to seek the truth this way?

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[322] *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, 11.

[323] Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2002), 170, (from now on *Country of My Skull* with the page number).

[324] Andre Brink, 'Interrogating Silence' in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970-1995,* Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jane Jolly, eds., (Cambridge [U.K]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 3.

Krog has been at the forefront of the movement to reinvigorate women's writing in South Africa. By rescuing from oblivion forgotten histories like the diaries of the Voortrekker Susanna Smit and the writings of Lady Anne Barnard and by incorporating them into her own poetry, she succeeded in focussing attention on the important role these women played in the early colonial history of South Africa, and on the difficulties and hardships which women endured on the Great Trek. However, her best known and possibly her most important work is *Country of my Skull.* In this meticulous work she records the formation and proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was a unique South African experiment to confront the atrocities committed by all parties during the apartheid years, and to try and find ways to come to terms with them. It arose out of the negotiations to draw up a new South African constitution after Nelson Mandela's release from imprisonment. It was decided that a Commission would be formed to investigate the wrongs done by the apartheid state and its agents to individuals, and by individuals to other individuals. This was an important and necessary part of the healing and forgiving process that needed to be undertaken if the new Rainbow Nation was to succeed. But it didn't end there. Those drawing up the constitution saw that wrong had also been done by the ANC in its struggle for freedom. So the TRC investigated wrongs done to all sections of South African society and it had the power where it thought fit to grant amnesty. Only in this way, it was felt, could South Africans of all races become reconciled.

Krog recorded the proceedings at great cost to herself, weaving together narratives, philosophy, politics and poetry, with a poet's unfailing instinct for the multi-faceted truths beneath the narratives oppressors weave to conceal their misdemeanours. The ramifications of Krog's work in *Country of my Skull,* in recovering and curating the many narratives of disruption and suffering that the TRC generated, have propelled her into the position of a public intellectual in South Africa, consulted both nationally and internationally as poet, philosopher and sociologist. This is a highly unusual position for someone we might regard as a 'settlor intellectual'. Such people are normally found fighting to preserve the economic power and privilege of their class. Not so Krog. As Garman observes:

> Given the nature of the post-apartheid public domain in South Africa, how has Krog's particular public intellectual performance received such a resounding response? It is because in Krog's biography and trajectory there is a complex intertwining of the literary as a field and the creation of writer subjectivity, the political sphere as the necessary stimulating environment for her writings and activities and the workings of the media and it's a/effects on the world. A concatenation of factors (with distinctive roots in each of these fields) has allowed Krog to construct a distinct subjectivity as a writer, which she

> has used to transcend the literary, engage the political, enter the media and finally, with accumulated symbolic capital and acclaim, to arrive at a position that, despite the complexity of the South African public space, continues to allow her both a platform and a voice in making an exemplary South African intellectual contribution.[325]

Antjie Krog was born in 1952 on a farm called Middenspruit near the town of Kroonstad in the Orange Free State to Afrikaans parents. She was educated in the local state school system, obtained qualifications from the University of the Orange Free State and the University of Pretoria, and then became a teacher at one of the universities for non-white students. Later she became editor of a current affairs magazine *Die Suid African* and then a radio journalist. It was in this capacity that she reported on the TRC. She has published fifteen books of poetry, four volumes of prose and numerous translations including Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, which she has translated into Afrikaans. She has also written many linguistic and philosophical papers for various publications dealing with issues of language and truth, a number of which arose from her reporting of the work and proceedings of the Commission.

Recording memory, folk history and myth seem to have been a part of Krog's upbringing, inculcated into her by her parents from her earliest days. In her book *Conditional Tense* she relates how:

> The image of a lonely rider in vigil over the injustice that was to be done to his people – that the war entered my consciousness as a child and became part of my earliest memory as an Afrikaner…Wherever we went on holiday my father would point out the plains, hills and farms where the war played itself out: here was where the son of General Christian de Wet was shot. Commandant Danie Theron hid in this farm[326]

and

> Ever since I can remember, my parents collected war stories and diaries relating to the people from our province, The Orange Free State, based on which my mother describes the beginning of the Anglo Boer war in her novel. . . [327]

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[325] Anthea Garman, *Antjie Krog and the Post-Apartheid Public Sphere: Speaking Poetry to Power* (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), XV.

[326] Antjie Krog, *Conditional Tense: Memory and Vocabulary after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, The Africa List (London ; New York ; Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2013), 156.

[327] *Conditional Tense*, 148.

This urge to collect and document the suffering of ordinary people is something Krog seems to have inherited from her mother's work, but it was not this that first drew public attention to her own work. When she was seventeen and still attending the conservative Afrikaans high school in the Free State town of Kroonstad, she published in the school magazine a clutch of poems with explicit sexual and racial imagery which were radical and provocative for their time. Perhaps even more astonishing was that the publication must have had her headmaster's consent. At the time I was also attending a boy's school 200 miles to the south east, in the much more liberal and mainly English speaking province of Natal. My headmaster would not have shown me that leniency. The poems scandalised the town to such an extent that the story was picked up by the Afrikaans national newspaper *Die Beeld*. One of the poems, 'My Mooi Land' ('My Beautiful Land') with its suggestion of sex across the colour bar, was published elsewhere:

My Mooi Land
Kyk, ek bou vir my 'n land
waar 'n vel niks tel nie, net jou verstand.
waar geen bokgesig in 'n parlement
kan spook om dinge permanent
verkramp te hou nie
waar ek jou lief kan hê
langs jou in die gras kan lê
sonder in 'n kerk 'ja' te sê
…..
waar ek jou nie gif hoef te voer
as 'n vreemde duif in my hare koer
waar swart en wit hand aan hand
vrede en liefde kan bring in my mooi land

—

Look, I build myself a land
Where skin colour doesn't count
Only the inner brand;

of self; where no goatface in parliament
can keep things permanently verkrampt

where I can love you

can lie beside you in the grass
without saying in church, 'I do'

where black and white hand in hand
can bring peace and love
to my beautiful land[328]

This may seem innocuous to our ears but at the time it was political dynamite especially coming from an Afrikaans school girl. Those few lines had a strange and unanticipated effect. In a similar manner to the way that Boris Pasternak's and Anna Akhmatova's poems were circulated underground in the depths of the Stalinist terror and gave heart to many, the kerfuffle in the newspapers was picked up by the ANC, and a translation of the poem into English was made by Ronnie Kasrils, head of the ANC military wing and then in exile. Somehow this poem and its translation found its way to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and the leadership of the ANC were imprisoned. It gave them new heart and encouraged them to believe that a new generation of Afrikaners was growing up, people who shared their beliefs that black and white could live together on equal terms. Such is the power of poetry.

Even if it is not poetry, *Country of My Skull* is an important work particularly for poets in countries in turmoil or those who live in communities which suffer a disaster of some sort and marks Krog as an epic-minded poet. Her vision, attitude of mind and dedication to the preservation and recording individual suffering in a quasi-poetic manner, is really the essence of what an epic-minded poet does. What Krog achieved in *Country of My Skull* is reminiscent of lines by Akhmatova in 'Requiem':

INSTEAD OF A PREFACE
During the frightening years of the Yezhov terror, I
spent seventeen months waiting in prison queues in
Leningrad. One day, somehow, someone 'picked me out'.
On that occasion there was a woman standing behind me,
her lips blue with cold, who, of course, had never in
her life heard my name. Jolted out of the torpor
characteristic of all of us, she said into my ear

[328] Antjie Krog (tr by the poet) in *Antjie Krog and the Post-Apartheid Public Sphere: Speaking Poetry to Power,* Anthea Garman, (South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 26.

(everyone whispered there) - 'Could one ever describe
this?' And I answered - 'I can.' It was then that
something like a smile slid across what had previously
been just a face.[329]

It is Akhmatova's confident 'I can' that marks her as an epic-minded poet. She can and she will find ways to record these narratives of individual tragedy and suffering and elevate them from an individual level to an epic dimension.

The revelation of truth became a key issue in the journey towards reconciliation of the wrongs different populations in South Africa had done to each other. Brink, another notable Afrikaner rebel maintains:

> societies cannot grow and mature unless they come to terms with the dark places – the silences in themselves.[330]

This desire to reveal the truth to the fullest extent possible is so important that Krog always nags at it. She continually asks herself and her readers where the boundaries lie between truth and justice and what the right balance is between them? Will a Commission be sensitive to the word 'truth'?

> If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense.[331]

Krog quotes the Chilean philosopher Zalaquett:

> It will sometimes be necessary to choose between truth and justice. We should choose truth, he says. Truth does not bring back the dead but releases them from silence.[332]

But when truth is recovered, what about forgiveness? She reports that when Tutu was asked to react to General Tienie Groenewald's remark: "I confess to God not to Tutu." He responded:

> *Jong*, if you've had a fight with your wife, it is no use you only ask forgiveness of God. You will have to say to your wife you are sorry. The past has not only contaminated our

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[329] Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem* http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/requiem/ accessed on 18-1-16.

[330] *Writing South Africa* 24.

[331] *Country of My Skull,* 16.

[332] *Country of my Skull,* 24.

> relationship with God, but the relationship with people as well. And you will have to ask forgiveness of the representatives of those communities that you have hurt.[333]

She records the proceedings in lucid and poetic prose, even the harrowing parts like the testimony of the assassin and torturer Dirk Coetzee, but always at great cost to herself and probably to her family:

> The word *Truth* makes me uncomfortable.
> The word *Truth* still trips the tongue….
> I hesitate at the word. I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either truth or trth. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word 'lie' the moment the lie raises its head I smell blood. Because it is there that truth is closest.[334]

She shows no mercy to herself and acknowledges that she has an affinity to many of the murderers; they are men of her clan:

> What do I do with this? They are as familiar as my brothers, cousins and school friends. Between us all distance is erased. Was there perhaps never a distance except perhaps the one I have built up with great effort within myself over the years? From the faces I can tell who was taken up by the Broederbond, who is a Rapportryer, who a Ruiterwag, who is working class. The Mentzes, I know have a musical bloodline. Whether your name is Jack or Paul or Johannes – it means something. In some way or another all Afrikaners are related. If somebody says his father bought land here, or he grew up in Odendaalsrus or Welkom - then I know. From the accents I can guess where they buy their clothes, where they go on holiday, what car they drive, what music they listen to. What I have in common with them is a culture – and part of that culture over decades hatched the abominations for which they are responsible. In a sense it is not these men but a culture that is asking for amnesty.[335]

It was not only the white Afrikaners who were called to account by the Commission. Wrongs had been committed by the ANC in their struggle and by others in violence between different groups of black people. One of the most notable members of the ANC to appear before the Commission was Winnie Mandela, 'the Mother of the Nation.'

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[333] *Country of my Skull*, 17.

[334] *Country of my Skull*, 36.

[335] *Country of my Skull,* 96.

On the 29th December 1988 four boys were kidnapped from the Manse of the Methodist Church in Orlando Soweto. They had been staying under the protection of the Reverend Paul Verryn, the white minister, who ran a refuge for homeless people there. The kidnappers were members of the Mandela football team. Stompie Moeketsi was one of these boys. He came from Parys, a dusty industrial town in the Northern Transvaal. He had been an activist since he was 10. Winnie and the football team (wrongly) believed that Verryn was a paedophile, and that members of their team were being lured away by him. They called the four boys traitors and accused them of selling themselves for sex. Stompie was singled out by her team manager, Jerry Richardson, for particularly savage treatment and was left brain damaged. He was later killed. He was barely thirteen. What was behind this treatment? It seems too extreme even for treachery? Why did a grown man need to beat up and then murder a boy? Was it perhaps sexual jealousy? Was Stompie a cherubino-like figure? Did Winnie sanction it or even take part? None of these questions have ever received satisfactory answers.

Stompie's murder and Winnie's involvement left a stain on the ANC which extended almost to Nelson Mandela himself. Some answers were needed in the climate of reconciliation which pervaded South Africa at the time. In 1997 Winnie appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was chaired by Tutu. Krog sat through the proceedings and records her impressions and she asked the question on everyone's lips:

> Why is it that a woman, a black woman from a long-isolated country, creates such an unprecedented media frenzy? Is it because Winnie Madikizela-Mandela answers to the archetype: Black and Beautiful? Or because she answers to the stereotype: Black and Evil?[336]

Krog listened with growing incredulity: to the evidence presented for and against Winnie; to the few people who had courage and were prepared to stand up and tell the world something of the truth, and to the many who claimed to have forgotten what happened, or who blatantly lied. As she said:

> A bizarre space evolves from the evidence. A house which had become the centrifugal force behind seemingly opposing attitudes. The house of the liberation movement's most revered political lineage and the house of lowly informers. The house where destabilized youngsters were both protected and killed. The house of famous, regal

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[336] *Country of My Skull, 244.*

> personalities, and the house of a particular kind of gangster personality – brutal, insecure inclined to pathological lying.[337]

Even the virtuous Albertina Sisulu, wife of Walter Sisulu, who suffered every bit as much as Winnie, would not say anything against her but equally she would not support her. In the end it was left to Desmond Tutu, the great conciliator, to find a formula, as Krog records:

> If you were able to say, he says to her "'Something went wrong. . . , and say "'I'm sorry, I'm sorry for my part in what went wrong. . . Forgive me.'" I beg you please… you are a great person. And you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say this.[338]

And Winnie responded because Tutu understood, and he had found a formula that was acceptable to her, and to her perception of her role, so she said to the Commission:

> I am saying that it is true: things went horribly wrong and we were aware of factors that led to that. For that I am deeply sorry.[339]

That was all the apology they got from Winnie Madizikela Mandela around whose neck the body of Stompie was hung, because there was no redemptive truth here. There are facts: the boy who stayed at her house was dead; he was beaten and then murdered by a brutal man; there is no denying Winnie's involvement in it. But she and many others believed that she should not bear this burden alone. Winnie suffered years of neglect from a man who loved her deeply but loved his cause more. She was a black woman who had to find ways to stand up for herself and her family, Nelson's family, against a brutal regime and a callous and patriarchal society. She was abandoned for Nelson's cause, but she was his standard bearer, his defender and his loyal supporter while he was in prison. The system was brutal, and she too was brutalised. Nelson Mandela and the ANC cannot dissociate themselves from this.

This is the obstacle, which faces an epic-minded poet, trying to make poetry from events in the recent past, which are not only fresh in people's minds, but have been widely reported and written on. There are facts, which you cannot change, but you have to work hard and be lucky. Perhaps you can uncover one of Lewis-Williams' evocative nuggets, smelt it down and transform it into a ring with Browning's skill. Perhaps, like Pound you can trawl the deep ocean and

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[337] *Country of My Skull,* 250.

[338] *Country of My Skull*, 259.

[339] *Country of My Skull,* 259.

somewhere within your catch there will be a strange truth-like fish, or perhaps, like Eliot, you can be a flâneur and a voice in the crowd will whisper to you. Perhaps the Prisoner's wife spoke the truth, when this poet/interrogator came to visit her in Hades, and with his pen dug 'the ell-square pitkin' and poured 'libations' for the dead. Perhaps she has unburdened herself to the epic-minded poet in a way she would not to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Conclusion – 'Epic-mindedness' and the need to write an epic poem

In the spring of 2016, I participated in the University's *Three Minute Thesis* competition. It was not easy to compete against the physical and social scientists, the computer wizards and the economists. Their scientific and method-oriented disciplines seemed to enable them to formulate clear hypotheses, which they could prove or discard with cleverly designed experiments, models and surveys. I wanted to write an epic poem about a country I left long ago. I had no route map, no clear plan of how this could be done.

My thesis as I presented it was 'Is it still possible to write an epic poem?', but in my presentation I skirted round a fundamental question: why an epic poem? Why not a novel, a play, a history, a memoir, or even a film? I argued that epic-minded poets bring something special to the table which novelists, dramatists, filmmakers and historians cannot. That assertion was a challenging one to make in 1821, when Shelley ended his polemic, *A Defence of Poetry,* with the bold claim that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'. How much more problematical is such a claim two centuries later in our fast-moving multi-media world, where many other storytellers stake their claim as purveyors of truth and curators of the public imagination? In my favour, I had proved to myself that I liked writing long narrative poems, and that I believed myself to be one of those who is, as Walcott observes, 'in servitude' to the muse of history:

> In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves, and a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force.[340]

I left South Africa in despair, believing that bloody revolution was coming. But I was wrong. It turned out that far from being full of recrimination, remorse and despair, something astonishing, wonderful, unprecedented and entirely unexpected had come to pass in South Africa. Something

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[340]'The Muse of History' from *What the Twilight Says,* 37-38.

that required understanding, but also acknowledgment and celebration. Something I had borne witness to. Something I felt I had the ability to convey to future generations. Something I felt was within my power to record through poetry. I set out to write a special sort of poem, one that would be long in the making - perhaps an epic. But before I did that, I needed to come to terms with what we currently mean by the word epic and what epic poetry was?

The historian Adam Nicholson wrote something that I felt was a satisfactory starting point:

> This is also a book about epic poetry, and the value of epic in our lives. Epic is not an act of memory, not merely an account of what people are able to recall, since human memory only lasts three generations: we know something of our grandparents, but almost nothing emotionally viscerally, of what happened in the generations before them. Nor is it a kind of history, an objective laying out of what occurred in the past to which we have little or no access. Epic, which was invented after memory and before history, occupies a third space in the human desire to connect the present to the past: it is the attempt to extend the qualities of memory over the reach of time embraced by history. Epic's purpose is to make the distant past as immediate to us as our own lives, to make the great stories of long ago beautiful and painful now.[341]

If you look at the clay tablets from Ashurbanipal's library in the British Museum which record one of the many versions of the Sumerian/Assyrian epic *Gilgamesh* you can see that there is considerable truth in this interpretation of epic. Somehow, against all odds, what can be interpreted as a record of an ancient cultural alliance between two completely different peoples, represented by the friendship between the mighty warrior Gilgamesh and the wild man Enkidu has outlasted all other records and artefacts. Ashurbanipal thought this connection with the distant past sufficiently important to place this poem in his library amongst all the other works of memoire, the records of conquests made, tributes received, taxes collected and official expenditure. It seems that there is, amongst the rulers and the ruled, an abiding perception of the importance of epic.

Crawford, writing about William Hayley's 1782 poetic essay 'Epic Poetry' says the following when trying to explain the importance of epic to Hayley and other eighteenth century poets concerned with the formation of a national identity:

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[341] Adam Nicolson, *The Mighty Dead - Why Homer Matters* (London: William Collins, 2015), xix.

> It was not Greece that made Homer; it was Homer who made Greece. It was by hearing Homer that the Greeks were inspired to achieve all that would make them famous in later years; if Homer had not sung, then Pericles would not have spoken, Plato would not have written, Leónidas would not have stood and fought. Alexander, the legend goes, slept with a dagger and an *Iliad* under his pillow. It hardly matters whether there was any truth in this. What counted was the idea: good epics make good nations.[342]

There is, in the great epic poems, that which defies definition. As Shelley said in *A Defence of Poetry* written in 1821, a year before he died: 'All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially', adding that:

> Homer was the first, and Dante the second epic poet: that is the second poet the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge, and sentiment, and political conditions of the age in which he lived and of the ages which followed it, developing itself in correspondence with their development.[343]

Perhaps no great epic poet was lonelier or more neglected than Blake, and yet his confidence in the power of his imagination and the importance of the message that only he could convey to the world, was unshakeable. This is his invocation to the muse from his epic *Jerusalem,* completed and printed between 1820 and 1827:

> Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me,
> Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task!
> To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
> Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
> Ever expanding in the bosom of God, the Human Imagination.
> O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love!
> Annihilate the Selfhood in me: be thou all my life![344]

The word 'epic' has its derivation in the classical Greek word 'epos', which was 'a collective term for early unwritten narrative poems celebrating incidents of heroic tradition.'[345] But in our times, the word has become slippery and hard to pin down. It has started to gather

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[342] Joseph Crawford, "Milton's Heirs: Epic Poetry in the 1790s," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 3 (2010), 427.

[343] *Shelley*, 527.

[344] William Blake, 'Jerusalem', *Blake: Complete Writings ; With Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 623, ll. 16 – 23.

[345] OED online http://0-www.oed.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/view/Entry/63665#eid5360090 accessed on 2/1/2017.

meaning to itself like a snowball rolling down a hill. You go on a fantastic ride at Alton towers – 'That was epic!' You ski a black run - 'Epic!' You go to a club and dance all night - That was really epic. You watch Lord of the Rings - 'Epic Movie!'. You watch TV drama - 'Breaking Bad' or 'Game of Thrones' - are they epics? You play Grand Theft Auto - are you an epic hero? There is a danger that the word epic is being stripped of the gravitas it has acquired over centuries of association with great works of literature, particularly great works of poetry. Johns-Putra talks about the 'polysemy of the word epic' and says that rather than define it we should 'attempt to engage with that very indeterminacy'.[346] It seems to me therefore, that the epic-minded poet must try not only to engage with that indeterminacy but must also reconcile himself or herself to the possible devaluation of a grand idea. This is not always easy to accept, if you are trying to satisfy yourself that the poetic task you have in mind, is a worthwhile endeavour.

While I was working my way towards a satisfactory understanding of epic, I came across this definition of epic in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

> A book, film, or other creative work resembling or likened to a traditional epic, esp. in portraying heroic deeds and adventures or covering an extended period of time.[347]

I found this helpful because it retained the idea of a heroic narrative but extended it to other art forms. Something else I found helpful was the working definition of epic used by Beissenger, Tyler and Wofford:

> …a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centres round deeds of significance to the community. These deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism, often narrated from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference. [But they] **. . .** exclude from the arena of study myth and other kinds of tales that depend largely on magic (many epics include briefer magical episodes), and we also exclude epics in prose although it is clear that the novel …is a form of the epic.[348]

Another approach suggested to me was thematic. This classified epic poems according to the appearance of so called 'epic identifiers'. I found a suitable example in the Wikipedia article on epic which the authors of the article acknowledged they took from the 1999 edition of *A*

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[346] Johns-Putra, 1.

[347] OED online http://0-www.oed.com.serlib0.essex.ac.uk/view/Entry/63237?redirectedFrom=epic#eid accessed on 12/1/2017

[348] *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World, 3.*

Handbook to Literature by Harmon and Holman. Their approach classifies a narrative poem as an epic if it includes the some of the following:

- It begins in medias res.
- The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world or the universe.
- Begins with an invocation to a muse (epic invocation).
- Begins with a statement of the theme.
- Includes the use of epithets.
- Contains long lists, called an epic catalogue.
- Features long and formal speeches.
- Shows divine intervention on human affairs.
- Features heroes that embody the values of the civilization.
- Often features the tragic hero's descent into the underworld or hell.[349]

Unfortunately, I found these definitions and lists unsatisfactory and reductive because they tried to pin down epic poetry by reference to its surface features and failed to capture its essence or mystery or account for its longevity. Furthermore, none of these definitions and lists seemed to provide any genuine help to me as an epic-minded poet who sought to write in the genre. A great epic poem is a work of the imagination and the spirit and cannot be constrained by definitions or pinned down by required themes.

Nowadays, the literary, artistic, and technological ways of presenting narrative themes that were formerly the domain of the epic poem seems ever increasing. Competition between genres to present such themes has become intense. Competition for public attention and performance space is ruthless. I wanted to return to the traditional idea of composing an epic poem for performance and not primarily as a literary work.

In the 1930s the scholars Milman Parry and Albert Lord were still able to find epic poets performing in the Balkans. In 2006 the writer and traveller William Dalrymple spent some time travelling in Rajasthan searching out the Bhopas, the singers of traditional epics. In Pabusar, deep in the Thar desert of North-West India, he met and befriended Mohan Bhopa, a bard and village shaman who, as Dalrymple explains:

> . . . though completely illiterate was one of the last hereditary singers of a great Rajasthani medieval poem, *The Epic of Pabuji,* a 600 year old poem which is a fabulous tale of heroism and honour, struggle and loss, and finally martyrdom and vengeance. Over time this has grown from a local saga about the heroic doings of a reiver-chieftain protecting

[349] Wikipedia 'Epic Poetry',https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic poetry, accessed on 6/11/2018 and various other occasions.

> his cattle to the epic story of a semi-divine warrior and incarnate god, Pabu….The epic is always performed in front of a *phad* , a long narrative painting made on a strip of cloth, which serves both as an illustration of the highlights of the story and as a portable temple of Pabuji the god[350].

The myth of *Pabuji* had snowballed over the centuries, accumulating to itself elements from other grand myths like the Ramayana but there was more to it in performance than the mere recital with its musical accompaniment, as this conversation which Dalrymple has with Mohan Bhopa shows:

> "So does Pabuji enter you while you perform?"
> "How can I do it unless the spirit comes?" Mohan said. "You are educated. I am not but I never forget the words, thanks to Pabuji. As long as I invoke him at the beginning,…all will be well. There is no trance – it is not possession. But whenever we invoke him and perform, then we feel him. …
> "The *phad* is his temple," he said. "The deity resides there, asleep until I wake him up… Sometimes when we recite the epic towards dawn the lamp glows white. It happens when we reach the crux of the story…." He added, "The lampblack from the lamp that glows in this way is very powerful. It can be used to heal anything."[351]

And, as Dalrymple observes:

> It was the old primeval link between story tellers and magic, the shaman and the teller of tales, still intact in 21st century Rajasthan[352]

I was also greatly encouraged to discover the Xhosa and Zulu epic traditions through Jeff Opland's work which had considerable influence on the way I wrote some parts of 'Rivonia'. Looking around the contemporary poetry scene in England I realised that there was still space for performers of epic poetry and people willing to spare the time to listen to it. The poet and musician Kate Tempest regularly drew large audiences to venues in central London with her thoroughly modern re-imaginings of epic themes in her works like *Brand New Ancients* and *Let Them Eat Chaos,* and the poet Alice Oswald has filled theatres and concert halls around the country performing her astonishing *Memorial: an Excavation of The Iliad.* In 2016 and 2017, I

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[350] William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 79, (from now on Dalrymple with the page number.)

[351]Dalrymple, 99.

[352] Dalrymple, 99.

performed 'The Prosecutor retires to his study' and 'In the Judge's Chambers' at the *Ink Festival* in Halesworth and both were well received. When I have finished *Rivonia,* I expect it will take about two and a half hours to perform. I hope to find space to do this and performers to help me with it.

I came to the conclusion that as an epic-minded poet, I needed to work with contemporary material but at the same time to distinguish my work by making it new, and appropriate for what I needed to say in the way that I wanted to say it. However, as Catherine Bate says, '…it is a quintessential if not defining characteristic of the epic to refer back to and revise what went before.'[353]So, I needed to place my work within the tradition, and to enable it to have a discourse with its illustrious forebears like *The Ring and the Book, The Waste Land* and *Omeros*. I needed to be true to my own muse, and to exigencies of my selected narratives and how they can be shaped to express my concerns. I was satisfied that the subject matter I was tackling was sufficiently epic in scope, and provided I could do justice to it, I would be able to address not only questions about the nature of society but also the existential and cosmological questions that concerned me. Pinker says that language is an instinct and is 'so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it.'[354] But if humans are 'language creatures', we are also hermeneutical ones with a deep need to reflect on and interpret our experiences in and of the world around us, to discern some order and purpose, to try, as Jens Zimmerman says 'to discover the truth about ourselves and the world we inhabit for the sake of wisdom'.[355]

All epic poetry is narrative. In my introduction I discussed the way these narratives are identified and the importance of finding the right ones. To build a house that will outlast the centuries you need strong foundations, otherwise, however glamorous the superstructure, it will not stand. Understanding how the epic-minded poet chooses his or her material from the store of narratives available was central to the writing of 'Rivonia' and to this critical commentary. Sometimes the arrival of these narratives has a mysterious and almost magical quality. Walcott had an understanding of this that I share:

> Epic was compressed in the folk legend. The act of imagination was the creative effort of the tribe. Later such legends may be written by individual poets, but their beginnings

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[353] *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ix.

[354] Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London: Penguin, 1995), 17.

[355] Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*, 1. ed, Very Short Introductions 448 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

> are oral, familial, the poetry of the firelight which illuminates the faces of a tight primal hierarchy.[356]

Many San paintings include renditions of eland because the San believed that eland were creatures of power and including them in the narrative of a painting gave it magical potency. Sometimes the San artists would mix the blood of eland into the pigments they were using to bestow more magical potency.[357] The epic-minded poet must choose a narrative with such innate power that like the dancers before the San artist's rock painting, the audience or reader can be transported outside of reality.

Epic-minded poets reach deep into oral and written traditions, trawling through myth, oral history and memory, to recover their narratives. They fill in the lacunae of history by mixing old and new narratives. The Trojan War lasted for 10 years and must have generated hundreds of narratives, some of which have come down to us through other authors or playwrights. But Homer in *The Iliad* chooses to focus on the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. Virgil, seeking to craft a Roman epic to give authority and legitimacy to the new Augustinian dynasty, does not write about Ocatavius' victories at Actium or Philippi. Instead he returns to Troy and its princeling Aeneas and constructs a hybrid of *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, giving Aeneas the warrior's skills of Achilles, and the statesmanship and sexual prowess of Odysseus. Milton did not write about the parliamentary victories at Naseby or Preston or Worcester, he chose a narrative of unassailable power: the expulsion of Satan and his followers from heaven. Blake, the most visionary of the epic poets, ignored the French Revolution and ('America' excepted) the War of Independence and followed Milton into the realm of cosmogonic myth, albeit of his own making.

In the early twentieth century there was a profound change in the way that poets viewed history and in the manner in which they used narratives. Europe had been wrenched apart by vast social change and then total war. As Bradbury and Macfarlane point out:

> linear and progressive notions of history are rendered dubious. Institutions inherited from the past (including the institution of language) are felt to be magnificent but

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[356] 'The Muse of History', in *What the Twilight Says*, 48.

[357] *Deciphering Ancient Minds*, 142

> hollowed-out shells which give some semblance of continuity with the past but in fact provide a beautiful surface for a pernicious reality.[358]

Nothing of the old order or the old certainties seemed to remain. How could an epic-minded poet hope to rebuild anything when the material he or she had worked with, proved inadequate to prevent the carnage? Eliot, Joyce and Pound found their own answers by returning to myth and deep history for their sources and innovating with fractured, non-linear narratives and multiple narrators. Walcott drew his narratives among the people of St Lucia where he grew up. The epic-minded poet must plot his or her own course through the underworld, salvage such 'fragments' as can be found and 'shore up' his or her 'ruins' in the way that seems most fitting. The discourse with the past is just a discourse, it has no mandate on what is still to be made.

In aspiring to write an epic poem after seventy years of relative peace in Europe, and after the peaceful transition in South Africa from a brutal authoritarian regime to a (relatively) harmonious democracy, I discovered the narratives I needed for 'Rivonia' in the country in which I was raised. But last year, I found myself on the banks of the river Tagus in Lisbon. From my hotel window I could see a mighty tower rearing up like a ship's mast. It was a monument to the Portuguese navigators who discovered the route to India around the Cape of Good Hope. Five hundred yards away was the tomb of Luís Vaz de Camões, thought by many to be the father of the modern European epic. European expansion into Africa and the New World and all that it brought with it, started from these river banks. My European and South African heritages were merging.

Now I ask myself, "What is this 'Rivonia' that you have spent so much time and effort on? Is it an epic like Camões' or Walcott's poems? Will anyone read it or better still, perform it?" But that doesn't really matter, because this 'Rivonia' is my own answer to Adorno.

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[358] James Walter McFarlane and Malcolm Bradbury, eds., *The New Penguin Guide to European Literature: Modernism 1890-1930* (Penguin Books, 1991), 327.

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